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# **Things Fall Apart**

BY CHINUA ACHEBE

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## NIGERIAN AUTHOR

- **Born in Ogidi (Nigeria) in 1930.**
- **Died in Boston in 2013.**
- **Literary awards:**
  - St. Louis Literary Award, 1999
  - Man Booker International Prize, 2007
  - Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, 2011
- **Notable works:**
  - *Things Fall Apart* (1958), novel
  - *No Longer at Ease* (1960), novel
  - *Arrow of God* (1964), novel
  - *Home and Exile* (2000), essays

Chinua Achebe was born in Ogidi, Nigeria, one of the first towns in the country to be visited by Anglican missionaries. His parents had converted to the Church Mission Society, a Protestant denomination, but continued to respect their ancestors' traditions.

Achebe's gift for reading and writing in English earned him entry to the prestigious Government College in Umuhia, which was modelled on English public schools and funded by the colonial administration, and had been set up to educate Nigeria's future elite. It was a very academically demanding school, and students were only allowed to talk to each other in English, the language of their colonisers.

In 1948, he was awarded a bursary to study medicine at University College in Ibadan, but during his time there he developed an interest in literature and became increasingly critical of the ways Africa and its people were depicted in European fiction. After reading *Mister Johnson* by Joyce Cary,

in which all the Nigerian characters were portrayed as either savages or buffoons, Achebe was so disgusted that he decided to abandon his medical studies and become a writer in order to prevent such glaring cultural ignorance and change people's perceptions of Africa.

After graduating, he began writing his first novel, which was a major challenge because very few African works of fiction had previously been published in English. However, on a trip to London he met the writer Gilbert Phelps, who introduced him to his agent in 1958. The agent sent Achebe's manuscript to numerous publishing houses, and Heinemann decided to take a chance on it. The novel, *Things Fall Apart*, met with popular and critical enthusiasm in England, but the reception in Nigeria was more mixed. However, years later the Nobel Prize-winning Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka described it as the first English-language novel to describe Africa from a truly African perspective.

Achebe has been described as the father of African literature, not just because of his prolific literary career (he was the author of over 20 books, comprising novels, essays, short stories and poetry collections), but also because of his commitment to getting other African writers published. This, coupled with an impressive academic career that saw him teach in both African and American universities, enabled him to transform African literature and the reputation of its writers.

Achebe died in Boston in 2013, but was buried in his native town of Ogidi. Although he never won the Nobel Prize in Literature, he is widely considered to be one of the greatest writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the over 30 honorary doctorates and countless prestigious literary awards he has received attest to the esteem in which he is held.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Achebe was highly critical of classic authors such as Joseph Conrad. In his essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", he described the Polish-British

writer as a “thoroughgoing racist” due to his dehumanisation of Africans and his depiction of Africa as a vast, dangerous battlefield devoid of humanity.

# *THINGS FALL APART*

## THE END OF AN ERA

- **Genre:** novel
- **Reference edition:** Achebe, C. (2001) *Things Fall Apart*. London: Penguin.
- **1<sup>st</sup> edition:** 1958
- **Themes:** masculinity and femininity, tradition versus modernity, pride, disobedience

*Things Fall Apart* was Chinua Achebe's first successful work, and is now considered to be a classic of African literature. Since it was first published in 1958, it has sold over eight million copies and been translated into more than 50 languages, making Achebe the most-translated African author of all time.

The novel tells the story of the celebrated wrestler Okonkwo, who is fighting to escape from the legacy left by his lazy, irresponsible father, and to overcome the problems resulting from the arrival of white missionaries in his town, Umuofia. His world is collapsing around him, and all he can do is struggle in vain against it, even if it costs him his life. The novel is a dazzling fusion of Western realism and Igbo oral tradition with its rituals, festivities, proverbs, tales and songs. It paved the way for a new generation of writers and profoundly altered both how Africans perceived themselves and how they were viewed by the rest of the world.

# | SUMMARY

## LIFE IN UMUOFIA

Umuofia is one of the nine villages of the Igbo nation, and is one of the most feared by its neighbours. It is home to Okonkwo, whose impressive feats have earned him a reputation as one of the most respected wrestlers in the region. He had a difficult childhood because of his father, an idle man who loved good wine and good food, but his efforts to rise above his past have paid off: he is now one of the most respected men in his clan, and has three wives, eight children, two barns and a number of goats and chickens. The rest of the community have realised that he is nothing like his father and see him as a role model.

The first part of the novel introduces us to Okonkwo's world through a series of episodes which illustrate what life is like in Umuofia, and by extension in the Igbo world as a whole. It has a rich culture with its own rituals, etiquette, moral codes, religious beliefs, songs and proverbs. As we become familiar with this world, we develop a deep wellspring of empathy which means that we are moved by what happens later on in the novel.

One such episode is the Week of Peace, during which nobody works and the neighbours all bury their grudges and come together to drink palm wine as a way of honouring the earth goddess who is responsible for making sure that crops grow. There is also the New Yam Festival, a celebration for giving thanks and honouring the earth goddess and the clan's spiritual ancestors. During the festival, the new yams cannot be eaten until they have been offered to the gods.

The death of Ikemefuna serves as an illustration of Umuofia's inhabitants' religious beliefs. When a woman from Umuofia was killed in Mbaino, the 14-year-old Ikemefuna was sent to live with Okonkwo's family as a token

of peace and a way of avoiding further bloodshed. He was welcomed as a member of the family, all of whom immediately warmed to him, especially Okonkwo's eldest son Nwoye, who has come to see him as an older brother. However, the Oracle decrees that Ikemefuna must be taken out of Umuofia and killed, and Okonkwo is forced to accept this and participate in the killing or he will be considered weak. Ikemefuna's death marks the beginning of Nwoye's rupture with his village and its customs, although he does not realise it at the time.

The second part of the novel opens with Okonkwo's exile, which provides us with a further illustration of the way Umuofia's laws work. During the frenzied dancing and drum-beating at the funeral of one of the village's greatest warriors, Okonkwo accidentally shoots the dead man's 16-year-old son in the heart. Killing a member of the clan is a crime against the earth goddess, so he has no choice but to leave the village. However, he is allowed to return after seven years because the killing was accidental.

## SEVEN YEARS IN EXILE

The second part of the novel depicts the beginning of the transition and subsequent collapse of the worlds of both Okonkwo and Umuofia as a whole.

After the accident, he has to gather his most valuable possessions and give his yams to his best friend Obierika so that they will not be lost. Before the sun rises, the family flees to Mbanta, Okonkwo's mother's native village. To appease the earth goddess, a group of warriors set fire to Okonkwo's huts, destroy his barns and kill his animals to purify the earth. This does not mean that they harbour any ill-will towards him; they are simply following the law.

Okonkwo's relatives on his mother's side give him and his family a warm welcome, as well as granting him land to build a new home and two or three fields to cultivate the following season. He builds three huts for his wives and sets up a shrine to his personal god and the symbols of his



deceased ancestors. To begin with, things are not easy for him: the family has to work hard to plant crops in a new field, and he feels as though he is starting his life from scratch but without the energy and enthusiasm of his youth. He knows that it will be difficult to regain his old place after his exile, but he is determined to do it and gradually builds his strength back up, knowing that this is the only way to stop his family from dying in exile.

Obierika comes to visit twice, and both visits herald the introduction of a new element in the story. During his first visit, he tells Okonkwo that a nearby village, Abame, has been wiped out by the whites to avenge the death of one of their men, who was killed on the Oracle's orders. During his second visit, he tells him that the missionaries have come to Umuofia.

Mbanta has also been visited by missionaries, one of whom is white. Soon, Nwoye begins going to the temple dedicated to the new god, and when his father finds out, he leaves the family for good and sets out to preach the teachings of his new religion. This marks a radical break for Okonkwo, who is left pondering what will happen if all his children follow in Nwoye's footsteps and desert their ancestors. He is worried that nobody will be left to pray for him and the rest of his ancestors if all his children decide to worship the whites' god.

## RETURN TO UMUOFIA

Seven years go by, and Okonkwo anxiously waits to return home. He knows that it will not be easy to win back his old position, but he plans to rebuild everything on a grander scale. Before coming back, he had already sent money ahead so that the building work can get underway. However, his return to the village ends up being less memorable than he had anticipated, and he finds that Umuofia has changed drastically in his absence. Like in Mbanta, the arrival of the missionaries has driven a wedge between the members of the clan and led many of them astray. This is not limited to the poor and the outcasts; some notable, titled men have also embraced the new beliefs. Furthermore, the white men have set up a court where cases are

judged by a District Commissioner who is completely ignorant of the local context:

“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. [...] He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.’” (p. 129)

However, not all of Umuofia’s inhabitants are as dismayed as Okonkwo and Obierika by the whites’ arrival. Some of them see it as a path to progress, and are enthusiastic about the palm oil and corn that the missionaries have brought with them, as these bring significant amounts of money to the village.

To begin with, the relationship between the missionaries and Umuofia’s inhabitants is largely peaceful. Mr Brown, the leader of the congregation, preaches peace and does everything in his power to avoid conflict with the clan. However, before long he is replaced by Mr Smith, who takes a radically different approach, has close ties with the government and believes that the missionaries are waging war against the forces of darkness. In other words, he sees any inhabitants of Umuofia who have not converted to Christianity as the enemy.

The relationship between Mr Smith and Umuofia’s inhabitants sours for good after a decisive event which drives the villagers to take action against the missionaries. During the annual celebration of the earth goddess, Enoch, one of the most radical and reactionary converts, tears off the mask of one of the *egwugwu* (which represent the town’s ancestral spirits). The following day, all the *egwugwu* meet in the town square and decide to set fire to the church.

However, this brings the clan’s leaders into open conflict with the whites. Okonkwo and six other leaders are imprisoned for several days and are only released after paying a hefty fine. Their arrest worries the village’s other inhabitants, who decide to meet in the square and discuss this new turn of

events. However, their meeting does not go to plan: while one of the leaders is delivering a speech outlining the events of the past few days, five court messengers step in to try and dissolve the gathering. Okonkwo refuses to let their leader pass, and when he insists, he draws his machete and beheads him. Okonkwo is aware of the punishment that awaits him, and decides to take his own life instead of allowing the white men to judge him according to their laws.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

Obi, the protagonist of Achebe's 1960 novel *No Longer at Ease*, is one of Okonkwo's grandchildren. The novel is based on the author's own experiences in Lagos, and deals with the challenges faced by the generation who grew up while Nigeria was gaining its independence. In contrast to *Things Fall Apart*, which centres on traditional Igbo culture, *No Longer at Ease* portrays modern Nigerian life.

# CHARACTER STUDY

## OKONKWO

Okonkwo is the novel's protagonist. He is one of the most famous wrestlers in the nine villages that make up the Igbo territory in the book because when he was 18 years old he brought honour to Umuofia by throwing Amalinze the Cat. He is described as "tall and huge", with "bushy eyebrows and [a] wide nose", and the narrator says that "[w]hen he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs" (p. 3). He has a volatile temperament: he is impatient and easily angered, and is quick to resort to violence when faced with a problem. He rules his household with an iron fist, and his wives and children are afraid of him. However, he behaves this way because he is naturally reserved and has been afraid of failure and weakness all his life, although most people are unaware of this. He is even afraid of himself, as he lives in fear that people will find out that he is like his father Unoka, who was feckless and idle and died a dishonourable death.

Thanks to his hard work, he has risen to become a wealthy man and one of the nine leaders of his clan. His lodgings are a clear indication of his prosperity: he has his own *obi* (hut), and each of his wives lives in a hut with her children. He also has two big barns full of yams, a shed for his goats and huts for his hens, and a small shrine where he keeps the wooden symbols of his personal god and ancestral spirits.

However, he also faces a series of difficulties. After accidentally killing a member of his own clan, he is forced to go into exile in his mother's native town for seven years. When this incident occurs, he fears that he will never be able to fulfil his ambition of becoming one of the clan's leaders, because his *chi* (personal god) is not made for great things. Even so, he strives to become respected in his new village: he sows a new field, starts his life

from scratch, works tirelessly and rises to become a pillar of the community.

When it is time to return to Umuofia, Okonkwo is determined to impress the other members of his clan and to make up for the lost time. However, when he gets back he finds that the village has been overrun by missionaries and British governors. He is pained to see that his clan is being torn apart by Christian teachings and that nobody is doing anything to halt the advance of the new religion: in his view, the village's warriors have "unaccountably become soft like women" (p. 133). Unlike the clan's leaders, who think that it is best to maintain a peaceful relationship with the whites, Okonkwo wants to fight back before the invaders completely wipe out the village and its traditions. He takes this belief to its logical extreme by killing the leader of the court messengers and committing suicide before the whites can judge or punish him. He stands by his convictions until the bitter end and dies as a warrior and one of the greatest men in Umuofia, even though the clan considers suicide to be dishonourable.

## UNOKA

Unoka is Okonkwo's father. He only appears in the first part of the novel, but is fundamental to understanding Okonkwo's mindset. He was lazy and seemingly incapable of planning ahead and thinking about the future; consequently, from a young age Okonkwo was the one who had to take care of the family and harvest the yams. Whenever he had any money, Unoka would always spend it on palm wine and invite the neighbours over to celebrate. He was always in debt, perhaps as a result of his love for good food, good company and playing the flute, which meant that the family frequently went hungry and everyone else mocked them because of his idleness. Throughout his life, Okonkwo strives to be the opposite of his father and to show the rest of his community that he is destined for greatness.

## NWOYE

Nwoye is Okonkwo's eldest son, but he has never been able to win his approval. Okonkwo is worried that Nwoye will grow up to be lazy, and he constantly shouts at and beats him to try and turn him into a strong man like him. For this reason, throughout the novel Nwoye is described as an unhappy child.

When Ikemefuna joins the family, Nwoye's spirits lift considerably, and he sees the new arrival, who is two years older than him, as a kind of big brother who knows everything there is to know. Ikemefuna teaches him to make bamboo flutes and set up ingenious traps for rodents, tells him stories and explains the names of birds to him. Thanks to Ikemefuna's influence, Nwoye gradually begins to enjoy tasks which are seen as masculine, such as chopping wood and grinding food. He also starts showing signs of wanting to dominate the women in the family and his younger brothers, which pleases his father, who wants him to have a good social position and enough food in his barn to make sacrifices to their ancestors. For this reason, Nwoye begins spending more time with Okonkwo, who tells him violent stories about the great men of his country.

When Okonkwo takes part in the murder of Ikemefuna, it is as though something breaks in Nwoye. He had also felt this way once before, when he heard a child crying in the depths of the forest, because according to tradition twins have to be put in earthenware pots and thrown into the forest. As a result, he is very receptive to the messages of the missionaries when they arrive in Mbanta two years later, and he finds that the new religion soothes his pain over the deaths of Ikemefuna and the twins. He practices Christianity in secret until his father finds out, at which point he leaves home for good. Nwoye's conversion is a decisive turning point in the novel, at it marks the moment when Okonkwo's world starts falling apart.

## EZINMA

Ezinma is Okonkwo's favourite daughter, and he constantly laments the fact that she is a girl, because she is stronger and more resolute than his eldest son Nwoye. She is very close to her father and is the only person who can

understand his moods. Her very existence is almost a miracle, since she is her mother Ekwefi's only surviving child. The two women share a bond based on camaraderie, which is strengthened by little secrets, such as eating eggs together when nobody is looking. Ezinma was an *ogbanje*, meaning a cursed child which died in infancy, then returned to its mother's womb to be reborn, only to die again. However, she has outlived Ekwefi's nine other children, all of whom died before their first birthday. After Ezinma's *iyi-uwa* (the magic stone which unites the *ogbanje* and the spiritual world so that they can repeatedly die and be reborn) is destroyed, Ezinma becomes a beautiful young woman and a great source of pride for her father. He asks her to marry a young man from Umuofia so that the family can regain their lost status after their seven-year exile and, knowing how important this is to him, she agrees.

## THE MISSIONARIES

The two missionaries who play the largest roles in the novel are Mr Brown and Mr Smith, who replaces him as the head of the congregation. Mr Brown is the first missionary who arrives in Umuofia to introduce the inhabitants to Christianity. Although he is strict, he tries his hardest to avoid any kind of conflict with the clan by respecting their traditions and creating a space to discuss the faith he preaches and the religion practiced by the Igbo tribes. This wins him the respect of the clan leaders, and when he visits one of the neighbouring villages he is presented with a carved elephant tusk, which is a symbol of dignity and status. Mr Smith's approach is in stark contrast to this, as he rejects Mr Brown's policy of compromise and adaptation. He has a black-and-white view of the world, and for him black is always bad. In his sermons, he compares the converts to an army of the light who are marching onto a battlefield against the forces of darkness. He also has close ties to the government, which hastens the decline of the Umuofia clan and Okonkwo's suicide.

# | ANALYSIS

## FORM

### Style

*Things Fall Apart* is a landmark in African literature, as it represents the moment when Africans began to tell their own stories. Writing about the continent was no longer limited to Europeans, and the new generation of African authors took a radically different approach to the subject.

Achebe believed that writers had a social duty towards their country. In one of his best-known essays, “The Novelist as Teacher”, he wrote: “I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them”. In *Things Fall Apart*, he explored the conditions which facilitated the drastic change in the traditional Igbo world as a result of the arrival of missionaries and representatives of the British government in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although Achebe did not experience the novel's events first-hand, his family background (his parents had converted to Protestantism) and his westernised education in Nigeria shortly before it obtained its independence from Britain were some of the consequences of the historical events it depicts. Achebe believed that it was important to understand his own society and to contribute to laying the foundations for this new country.

Perhaps one of the novel's greatest achievements is the way it immerses us in the Igbo world of the village of Umuofia and uses the protagonist Okonkwo to introduce us to its celebrations, customs, rituals, religious beliefs, lifestyle, songs and proverbs. Although it uses Western narrative techniques, which Achebe picked up from the books he read when he was



younger, there is a crucial change in perspective: although the novel uses an omniscient third-person narrator, this narrator is not a European chronicler, but seems to be one of the Igbo. This means that, instead of depicting Okonkwo as a repulsive, ignorant savage with strange clothing and a spear, they try to understand his dilemmas and fears as he faces a group of foreigners who threaten to destroy everything he holds dear, namely his clan and the traditions of his ancestors. He is depicted as a warrior who is ultimately doomed to self-destruction.

The novel's final sentence, "[h]e had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*" (p. 152) is also interesting, and serves to poke fun at the European ethnographic tradition. The court messenger who helps to cut Okonkwo's body down from the tree says that he has lived in Africa many years and has tried hard to bring "civilisation" to the continent, thus suggesting that imperialism was a cultural and educational project, when in fact it was the exact opposite, and sowed death and destruction across Africa, Asia and Latin America. As Walter Benjamin wrote in his essay "On the Concept of History", "[t]here is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (2006: 392), and it has often been said that history is written by the victors.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

In 2011, Achebe rejected the title of Commander of the Order of the Federal Republic, one of the most prestigious honours in Nigeria, for a second time. Before the prize-giving ceremony, he sent a letter to the Nigerian president, Goodluck Jonathan (born in 1957), in which he explained that he did not want to receive the prize because in the seven years since he had last rejected it, there had been no decline in the rampant corruption, poverty and abuse of power in the country.

## **Structure**

*Things Fall Apart* comprises three parts which recount the progressive decline and destruction of the Igbo world. The first part depicts an Edenic Umuofia, whose inhabitants live as a community, obey the rules established by their leaders and respect their deities. This is Okonkwo's world, and he is proud of it. The second part represents a transition: rumours about the impending arrival of the whites begin to spread and they gradually begin settling in the villages, but at this stage they seem to be nothing more than a latent threat. However, towards the end of the second part, the tension between the whites and the Igbo begins to mount as Nwoye converts to Christianity and leaves his family and the missionaries arrive in Umuofia. Their arrival results in a rift within the community, as the things that previously united them fade away and the village begins to fall apart. The third part represents the culmination of this process: it recounts Enoch's unmasking of the *egwugwu*, the leaders' inability to act and their subsequent imprisonment, which mark the fall of Igbo culture. From now on, the community will have to submit to the whites if they want to stay alive, but some of them choose self-destruction over subjugation.

## THEMES

### **Masculinity and femininity**

*Things Fall Apart* is structured around the contrast between masculinity and femininity. As we see through the character of Okonkwo, in Igbo culture masculinity is viewed positively and associated with qualities such as strength and courage. For example, yams are referred to as "the king of crops" (p. 18) and associated with virility, and are only harvested by men because of the intense labour involved. Within the community, men who can grow a good yam crop to feed their families year after year are universally respected. Yams are also a symbol of status and wealth, as the importance of a member of the clan can be discerned through the number of barns they have to keep their yams and the size of the plot they have to grow them. A man's crop of yams provides a good indication of his work ethic.

Throughout the novel, Okonkwo is compared to fire and the other members of the clan call him the “Roaring Flame” (p. 112). Fire is associated with life (because it is always moving), virility and destruction, but as the story progresses it is gradually replaced by ash. For example, when Nwoye flees with the missionaries, Okonkwo asks himself how he, the man everyone sees as a burning fire, could have fathered a degenerate, effeminate child like Nwoye and even denies that he is his son: “And immediately Okonkwo’s eyes were opened and he saw the whole matter clearly. Living fire begets cold, impotent ash. He sighed again, deeply” (p. 113). Fire, which also represents the possibility of reproduction, is contrasted with ash, which represents weakness, impotence and even death. Okonkwo says that the missionaries’ words can even reduce fire to ashes; this refers to the decline of his clan and, ultimately, to the collapse of the Igbo world. After he dies, his family may be left adrift, which would put them at risk of falling into the missionaries’ hands and in doing so abandoning all their past and traditions.

However, the novel also demonstrates how Okonkwo sometimes takes masculinity too far. His turbulent relationship with his father, who was a laughing stock in the community, made him hardworking and tenacious, but also extremely violent and quick-tempered. These attributes are evident in numerous episodes in the novel: for example, he insults the earth goddess by hitting one of his wives during the Week of Peace, and he voluntarily participates in the killing of his adoptive son Ikemefuna so as not to appear weak or effeminate.

Conversely, femininity has negative connotations in the novel, and is associated with ideas like weakness and subjugation. When Okonkwo was younger, one of his contemporaries insulted him by calling him *agbala*, which is used to refer not only to women, but also to men without titles. Masculinity is linked to the public sphere and to concepts such as reputation and wealth, while femininity belongs to the private sphere. This means that it is associated with motherhood and housework, and also with feelings and intimacy. For example, the clan’s women sleep next to their children in their huts and tell them folk tales about animals, which are looked down on for their alleged lack of moral value, unlike the stories of war and violence that

the men tell. Shying away from conflict, indecisiveness and inaction are also associated with femininity. When Okonkwo goes into exile in his mother's native village of Mbanta, he cannot understand why his relatives would willingly give land to white men and flies into a rage because he thinks that the matter would have been settled by fighting in Umuofia.

Nonetheless, femininity has its own hidden power, and is linked to the earth. When children are with their mothers, they can speak openly and truly be themselves, and when Okonkwo goes into exile and feels humiliated at returning to his mother's village, his uncle Uchendu reminds him that although the children belong to their father when things are going well, they seek comfort from their mothers when times are hard. Fire gives life, but earth nourishes and maintains it. Interestingly, one of the most important Igbo deities is the earth goddess Ani, who is honoured during major celebrations such as the New Yam Festival and the Week of Peace. Ani is also the judge of morality and good conduct: for example, when Okonkwo accidentally kills one of the members of the clan, he has to leave his father's land because he has offended Ani. Although the mortal world is governed by men, the spirit world seems to be at least partially ruled by women, some of whom serve as a bridge between our world and the world beyond it.

### **The tension between tradition and modernity**

The novel's epigraph and title come from the William Butler Yeats (Irish poet, 1865-1939) poem "The Second Coming" (1919), and hint at the fragility of a system on the brink of collapse. The "centre [that] cannot hold" is the Igbo world, which is threatened by the arrival of the English bureaucracy and the missionaries, who represent the "second coming" of the god who died to redeem humanity and whose friendly veneer conceals a desire to tear the clans apart and destroy their traditions and worldview in order to impose their own.

The tension between tradition and adaptation is an existential question for the characters of *Things Fall Apart*. For Okonkwo, it is a question of status: throughout the novel, he is critical of the clan leaders in Mbanta and

Umuofia because of their failure to take decisive action to show the missionaries who the real bosses are:

“‘Let us not reason like cowards,’ said Okonkwo. ‘If a man comes into my hut and defaecates 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. These people are daily pouring filth over us, and Okeke says we should pretend not to see.’” (p. 117)

However, Okonkwo does not realise that these new adversaries are fundamentally different to their old enemies because they are not part of the Igbo world. As Obierika points out, the white men do not even speak the same language as the clan, which means that they are unable, and worse still, unwilling to understand. Instead, they are trying to secretly manipulate the fragile structures holding the community together to win over new followers. For example, the missionaries approach the *osu* (the village pariahs) and the *efulefu* (low-ranking, ignorant members of the community) with the aim of convincing them to abandon their traditional customs and embrace this new faith, which treats them as equals and even makes them feel that they are the chosen ones. This is clearly shown to have paved the way for the imposition of colonial law and British customs in the country.

The transition to a new faith and religious order, which are wholly incompatible with Igbo customs, formally begins when Enoch claims to have killed and eaten a royal python, “the most revered animal in Mbanta and all the surrounding areas” (p. 116). However, he is not officially a member of the community, which means that he is not punished and does not have to carry out the expiatory sacrifices or costly ceremony that any other man would be obligated to complete. The moment when he destroys the mask of one of the *egwugwu*, which symbolise Umuofia’s culture and laws, marks the moment when the whites take full control of the government. The clan loses its political independence, its leaders are threatened and its spirit perishes. Anyone who is not prepared to adapt to these changes, like Okonkwo, must die as well.

## **Pride and disobedience**

As we have already explained, Okonkwo is hard-working and responsible, but also violent and quick-tempered. He is proud, but this does not mean that he cannot own up to his mistakes; rather, it means that he only admits them when they contravene the clan's rules. He never questions the punishments he receives, and accepts them uncomplainingly whether or not he believes that they are fair, as this is the only way he can preserve his reputation and honour in Umuofia. When he is exiled for seven years, he gathers his belongings the same day and leaves for Mbanta with his family, even though he did not mean to kill the boy. It is made clear that Okonkwo is not cruel or evil, but rather that he spends every day fighting his worst fear: his fear of himself and of being compared to his father. For this reason, he is constantly struggling against idleness and weakness.

Another of the novel's central themes is pride, which also causes conflict for Okonkwo. From the second part of the story onwards, he finds himself torn between his personal pride and the joint decisions taken by Umuofia's leaders regarding the arrival of the missionaries and the representatives of the British government. His inability to adapt or compromise his principles to take a more tolerant or compassionate stance ultimately drives him to suicide. This is the only time he deliberately flouts the rules of the Igbo people. His acute sense of pride and dignity mean that he chooses to live and die on his own terms rather than submitting to the white men and betraying his core values of manliness, courage and tradition.

## FURTHER REFLECTION

### SOME QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT...

- What other episodes in world history can be compared with the events in *Things Fall Apart*?
- Would you describe Okonkwo as an antihero? Justify your answer.
- What role do women play in Okonkwo's life?
- How does the Igbo world change between Unoka and Nwoye's generations?
- What role do stories and tales play in the novel?
- Do you agree with Achebe's conception of the writer as a socially engaged figure? What should the role of the writer be in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Justify your answer.
- What is the role of nature in the novel?
- Do you agree with the assertion that history is written by the victors? What is the value of telling a story from the point of view of a "loser" like Okonkwo?

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# FURTHER READING

## REFERENCE EDITION

- Achebe, C. (2001) *Things Fall Apart*. London: Penguin.

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