



# Things Fall Apart

by Chinua Achebe

A Lively Learning Guide  
by Shmoop

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## In a Nutshell/Overview

Originally written in English and published in 1958, *Things Fall Apart* was one of the first novels by an African author to garner worldwide acclaim. Though mostly fictional, Nigerian author [Chinua Achebe](#) claims that the book documents Africa's spiritual history - the civilized and rich life the [Igbo](#) lived before the arrival of Europeans and the ruinous social and cultural consequences that the arrival of European missionaries brought. Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* as a sharp criticism of imperialism, or the European colonization of countries outside of the European continent (especially Africa and the Americas). The novel also critiques [Joseph Conrad](#)'s famous novel, *Heart of Darkness*, which documented the African natives from an imperialist's (or white colonizer's) point of view. Achebe followed *Things Fall Apart* with two other novels, [No Longer At Ease](#) and [Arrow of God](#), both of which also depict the African experience with Europeans.

## Why Should I Care?

So, unless you're from Nigeria, you might not be able to relate to the [Igbo](#) culture. We bet your dad hasn't murdered your adoptive brother, and we're guessing that your country hasn't just been colonized and your culture shattered. But if you think you can't relate to this book, think again. Do you mean to tell us that you've never been afraid of becoming like one of your parents? Even an eensy bit scared?

One of the most fascinating parts of *Things Fall Apart* comes from watching Okonkwo's ongoing battle against being like his father. Okonkwo doesn't respect anything about his father, which is a bit extreme. Most people, though, do see qualities in their parents that scare them. You know, like the kid with the alcoholic dad who decides never to touch a drink, or the one that has a hideously penny-pinching mom who grows up vowing to never shop at a discount store or use coupons while grocery shopping.

It's common for people to fear being like their parents, and overcompensate by behaving in the completely opposite way. Okonkwo, however, is an example of what happens to a person who concerns himself more with avoiding his father's traits than with living his own, independent life.

## What's Up With the Title?

From its very title, *Things Fall Apart* foreshadows the tragedy which the novel depicts. We don't mean to be downers, but can a book about things falling apart really have a happy ending? The novel documents the falling apart of the [Igbo](#) tribe due to the coming of the Christian missionaries and the rule of the English government.

The only point in the book in which the title is referenced is Chapter Twenty, when the main character, Okonkwo, and his friend, Obierika, are discussing the invasion of white men into their community. Obierika says, "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." This passage clearly ties the destruction of the Igbo people's way of life to sneaky, divisive action on the part of European missionaries and imperialists.

The phrase "things fall apart" is from a poem by [W.B. Yeats](#), which Achebe quotes more extensively in the epigraph (see "What's Up With the Epigraph?" for more detail).

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## Writing Style

It doesn't take much to notice that there's something interesting about the way *Things Fall Apart* is written. Although Achebe writes in English, he captures the cadence of the Ibo people, particularly noticeable in the book's dialogue. In the narration, Achebe keeps it simple, directly to the point, and centered on nature. His goal is to use language to depict how the Ibo view their world. You'll also see a bunch of Ibo words and phrases pop up here and there. (Use the glossary in the back of the book when needed.)

In addition to the cadence and content choice, Achebe also uses a ton of proverbs - which is indicative of the Ibo's traditional oral culture - as well as lots of tiny stories shared people and well known in certain villages, used to discuss everything. These stories are how the people communicate with one another; they're used to explain acts of nature, traditions, history, why people act a certain way. Keeping all that in mind, let's take a look at this interaction, a few paragraphs into Chapter 12:

*Some of the women cooked the yams and the cassava, and the others prepared vegetable soup. Young men pounded the foo-foo or split firewood. The children made endless trips to the stream. [...]*

*"The market in Umuike is a wonderful place," said the young man who had been sent by Obierika to buy the giant goat. "There are so many people on it that if you throw up a grain of sand it would not find a way to fall to earth again.*

*"It is the result of great medicine," said Obierika. "The people of Umuike wanted their market to grow and swallow up their market and their neighbors. So they made a powerful medicine [...]*

*"And so everybody comes," said another man, "honest men and thieves. They can steal your cloth from off your waist in the market."*

We've got sparse description, an Ibo word (*foo-foo*), some cadenced dialogue, a mini-story about medicine to explain why the Umuike market is

so crowded, and men finishing each other's thoughts and explanations. If you ask us, Achebe did an amazing job capturing the spirit of his native Igbo language in his *second* language, English.



## **Tone**

### **Clear, Descriptive, Sympathetic toward the Umuofia**

Achebe narrates events pretty objectively, without many embellishments. Readers are left largely to impose emotion on the text and decide for themselves whether characters are admirable or justified in their behaviors. However, towards the end, Achebe begins showing sympathy towards the Umuofia by describing the brutalities inflicted on the people by the white government. The last paragraph of the book in particular shows a purely pretentious and self-satisfied District Commissioner with an inflated sense of Western superiority.

## **Narrator Point of View**

### **Third person omniscient**

Though most of the novel is focused on Okonkwo, the narrator generally provides insight into the thoughts of most characters. There are times when the narration is focused around different characters - namely Ikemefuna, Nwoye, Obierika, and Ekwefi. The multiplicity of voices allows the reader to see different characters through a variety of lenses. Access to the internal thoughts of a variety of characters also gives dimensionality to the Igbo people as a whole - Achebe never lets the reader assume that the Igbo people are homogenous and could be summed up in one single character.

## **Symbols, Imagery, Allegory**

### **Folktales**

To Okonkwo, folktales - especially those featuring animals - are a symbol of femininity. To him, the stories seem to show a childish love for escapism and provide few useful values or morals. Mothers and daughters in the novel have a tendency to share folktales, but they are also one of Okonkwo's son Nwoye's favorite forms of entertainment. Because Nwoye prefers folktales over bloody war stories, Okonkwo fears that his son is too effeminate.

### **Yams**

Yams are a crop grown exclusively by men. Growing yams is labor intensive, and the size of a man's fields and harvest say much about his work ethic. Yams are grown to gain wealth and also to feed one's family. They are a symbol of masculinity and ability as a provider.

### **Fire**

The narrator and characters often compare Okonkwo to fire, he even has the nickname around town as the "Roaring Flame." For Okonkwo, fire is a symbol of boundless potency, life, and masculinity. However on realizing his complete disappointment in his son Nwoye, Okonkwo has the realization that "Living fire begets cold, impotent ash." Like fire, Okonkwo sees his own progeny as impotent.

### **Ash**

As you might guess, ash is seen as impotent, cold, and lifeless. Okonkwo links ash to emasculation. Not only does Okonkwo compare his own son, Nwoye, to ash, but the court messengers are also called "Ashy-Buttocks" - a comment about the color of their shorts but also about their masculinity.

## **The Mother of the Spirits**

The Mother of the Spirits is seen as the mother of the *egwugwu* and therefore a deity worshipped by the Umuofia. In many ways, she is the personification of the Umuofia clan. The point at which one of the Christian converts, Enoch, commits the terrible crime of unmasking one of the *egwugwu* is a climactic moment for the Umuofia. Unmasking an *egwugwu* is equivalent to murdering a god. It is a point at which the Umuofia way of life has been deeply disrespected and the damage done is irreparable. The night after the unmasking, the Mother of the Spirits loudly mourns the death of her son. The narrator draws a comparison between the Mother of the Spirits and the clan: "It seemed as if the very soul of the clan wept for the great evil that was coming - its own death." It's also important that the Mother of the Spirits takes no action but weeping and mourning - she doesn't avenge the death of her son, and neither will the Umuofia people avenge the crimes the white men commit against them.

## **The *Egwugwu***

The *egwugwu* are a symbol of the culture and independence of the Umuofia. The *egwugwu* are seen as ancestral gods, though in actuality they are masked Umuofia elders. The *egwugwu* serve as respected judges in the community, listening to complaints and prescribing punishments and deciding conflicts. Just as the *egwugwu* are superstitiously thought to be the spirits of the Umuofia ancestors, for the sake of the novel, they are symbolically the spirit of the clan. When the *egwugwu* lose power in the community and are replaced by a white court, the clan's culture and independence is lost.

## Genre

### **Tragedy, Historical Fiction, Literary Fiction**

As you might guess from the title, *Things Fall Apart* is a tragedy. It tells the story of an African clan being invaded by outsiders and falling to pieces. The novel also tells the story of Okonkwo, a man of wealth and status who nonetheless has a tragic flaw - fear of being perceived as weak - which leads him to make many poor life decisions. Eventually sent into exile, our protagonist is not in his home village when the outsiders - white missionaries - first arrive. Thus he is not able to save his people during the early stages of danger. In the end, because of he lacks the ability to save his tribe, Okonkwo kills himself. As stated by his best friend, Okonkwo's death is tragic because white men drove a good man to kill himself. Okonkwo's personal failings might also have had a hand in it.

## Setting

### **The Umuofia and Mbanta villages of the Igbo tribe in Nigeria, around 1900**

The setting in Nigeria around the turn of the 19th century is extremely important; it allows Okonkwo's life to straddle the pre- and post-European imperial era. Because Okonkwo experiences both periods, we the reader have a window into the dramatic changes that occurred in Igbo culture and society as a result of imperialism. For example, we see two different manners in which crimes of murdering a clansman are treated: Okonkwo is exiled for seven years under Igbo laws while another man, Aneto, is hanged by the white court for a similar crime.

We also see two different examples of courts and justice. In the traditional Igbo system of justice, villagers bring their complaints to a group of nine elders dressed as masked gods, and the group jointly and publicly settles disputes. However, when the white men arrive, they set up their own court which settles disputes in favor of the highest bidder and isn't above secretly ambushing respected clansmen who come to court to have a civilized discussion. These are only a few examples of how the temporal setting allows for clear and easy comparison between the Igbo way of life before and after the arrival of Europeans.

The physical setting of forest the forest villages are extremely important. The Umuofia clan has an elaborate religious system largely based on their natural environment. Surrounded by dense, dark woods, the forest is both respected and feared as a chief god, the Evil Forest. The earth goddess is also revered and feared; as farmers, the Umuofia rely completely on the produce of the land and are subject to drought and flooding. The earth goddess is seen as in control of the weather and productivity of the land, so much of the clan's social structure is set around not displeasing the earth goddess. Fear of offending the earth goddess motivates the punishment for many crimes, such as Okonkwo's seven-year exile for killing a clansman. Achebe's descriptions of the isolation of the Umuofia people and their

complete dependence on their natural setting make their culture and practices understandable to a Western audience.

## What's Up With the Epigraph?

*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.*  
- [W.B Yeats](#), "[The Second Coming](#)"

The epigraph is the first four lines of "[The Second Coming](#)," easily one of the most famous and frequently quoted poems in all of Western (and apparently Nigerian) literature. Yeats's poem was first published in 1920, a year after the end of World War I, "the Great War," in which millions of Europeans died. While many people at the time just wanted to get on with their lives, Yeats thought that European society had pretty much broken down, and the poem is a terrifying prediction of future violence. Unfortunately, the rise of Hitler and fascism in the 1930s proved him largely correct, and many have found the poem disturbingly prophetic in light of the later wars of the twentieth century.

By using lines from "[The Second Coming](#)" as the introduction to his book, Achebe points out parallels between a time of chaos in European history and the upheaval caused by the European colonization of Africa. In a way, Achebe uses the language of the colonizer (literally and figuratively) to enlighten them on the point of view of the colonized.

The specifics of the poem are also incredibly relevant to *Things Fall Apart* as a whole. The poem begins with the image of a falcon flying out of earshot of its human master. In medieval times, people would use falcons or hawks to track down animals at ground level. In actual falconry, the bird is not supposed to keep flying in circles forever; it is eventually supposed to come back and land on the falconer's glove. In this image, however, the falcon has gotten itself lost by flying too far away, which we can read as a reference to the collapse of traditional social arrangements in Europe at the time Yeats was writing, or the dissolution of the Igbo social and religious structure.



The notion that "things fall apart" serves as a transition to the images of more general chaos that follow. The second part of the line, a declaration that "the centre cannot hold," is full of political implications, like the collapse of centralized order into radicalism. This is the most famous line of Yeats's poem: the poem's "thesis," in a nutshell. Since Achebe used "things fall apart" as his title, it can also be seen as the "thesis" of his book. In the novel, the traditional social structure of the Igbo is challenged by the missionaries and the white court. As a result, the Igbo people no longer have one set of social or moral rules to live by and the unity of the clan is shattered.

Yeats' poem continues on to give the impression that the second coming of Christ is actually the coming of anarchy and a fearful anti-Christ. The second coming brings destruction and chaos to a world corrupted by its own greed. This was the end of Western civilization as Yeats imagined it. What better way to illustrate that decline of Western morals than for Achebe to show white men coercing and brutalizing a civilized people into destroying themselves. The "anarchy loosed upon the world" is, to Achebe, the horrors of imperialism.

## Book Summary/Plot Overview

Though Okonkwo is a respected leader in the Umuofia tribe of the [Igbo](#) people, he lives in fear of becoming his father - a man known for his laziness and cowardice. Throughout his life, Okonkwo attempts to be his father's polar opposite. From an early age, he builds his home and reputation as a precocious wrestler and hard-working farmer. Okonkwo's efforts pay off big time and he becomes wealthy through his crops and scores three wives.

Okonkwo's life is shaken up a when an accidental murder takes place and Okonkwo ends up adopting a boy from another village. The boy is named Ikemefuna and Okonkwo comes to love him like a son. In fact, he loves him more than his natural son, Nwoye. After three years, though, the tribe decides that Ikemefuna must die. When the men of Umuofia take Ikemefuna into the forest to slaughter him, Okonkwo actually participates in the murder. Although he's just killed his adoptive son, Okonkwo shows no emotion because he wants to be seen as Mr. Macho and not be weak like his own father was. Inside, though, Okonkwo feels painful guilt and regret. But since Okonkwo was so wrapped up in being tough and emotionless, he alienates himself from Nwoye, who was like a brother to Ikemefuna.

Later on, during a funeral, Okonkwo accidentally shoots and kills a boy. For his crime, the town exiles him for seven years to his mother's homeland, Mbanta. There, he learns about the coming of the white missionaries whose arrival signals the beginning of the end for the Igbo people. They bring Christianity and win over Igbo outcasts as their first converts. As the Christian religion gains legitimacy, more and more Igbo people are converted. Just when Okonkwo has finished his seven-year sentence and is allowed to return home, his son Nwoye converts to Christianity. Okonkwo is so bent out of shape that he disowns his son.

Eventually, the Igbo attempt to talk to the missionaries, but the Christians capture the Igbo leaders and jail them for several days until the villagers cough up some ransom money. Contemplating revenge, the Igbo people hold a war council and Okonkwo is one of the biggest advocates for

aggressive action. However, during the council, a court messenger from the missionaries arrives and tells the men to stop the meeting. Enraged, Okonkwo kills him. Realizing that his clan will not go to war against the white men, the proud, devastated Okonkwo hangs himself.

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# Chapter One

## Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Amalinze the Cat, Unoka, Okoye

## Summary

- We meet Okonkwo at age 18 during a wrestling match - the moment that he first becomes famous among the local villages.
- Okonkwo is fighting against an undefeated wrestler called Amalinze the Cat, but in the end, Okonkwo throws the Cat and wins the contest.
- This wrestling match actually happened twenty years ago, and since then Okonkwo's reputation has grown and spread.
- Achebe describes Okonkwo as a pretty intimidating guy. He's physically huge, has an intense face, and tends to use his fists to settle his arguments. And he's impatient with "unsuccessful" men - like his dad.
- Okonkwo despises his late father, Unoka, for his laziness. Unoka died ten years ago, but essentially was totally irresponsible and was always blowing his money on booze (okay, gourds of palm-wine). He was a drink-and-be-merry kind of guy who enjoyed playing the flute, feasting, and celebrating.
- As a youth, Unoka was a musician and his happiest moments were after the annual harvest, when the whole village would gather to feast and enjoy the music.
- Later in life though, Unoka was a failure because he was too lazy to work. Instead, he borrowed money from all his friends and could barely afford to feed his family. He became the laughingstock of the village.
- Flashing back to when Unoka was alive, we see a telling scene. Okoye, Unoka's neighbor, comes to visit Unoka and offers him a kola nut, which is a ritual gift. Okoye goes through a long-winded, stylized discourse which is a polite way of asking Unoka to pay back the loan of 200 cowries he borrowed from Okoye.

- Unoka laughs at Okoye and points at his wall, on which he has marked down all his debts. He owes a lot of people a lot of money. He snubs Okoye, saying he means to pay off his big debts first (because he's in major debt) and Okoye is forced to leave empty-handed.
- The flashback ends.
- Unoka died in debt, which is why Okonkwo is ashamed of him. Okonkwo, unlike his father, established himself as a rich successful yam farmer with three wives and two tribal titles. He seems destined for great things.
- At the end of the chapter, we are left with a tantalizing snippet of information - Okonkwo is somehow left in charge of an ill-fated boy named Ikemefuna.

## Chapter Two

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Ikemefuna, Okonkwo's first wife

### Summary

- This chapter tells the story of how Okonkwo ends up with Ikemefuna.
- Okonkwo lies in bed contemplating the meaning of the gong sounded by the town crier late at night. The gong signals that the men must gather in the morning, but Okonkwo fears that something bad has happened.
- We learn that the people of Umuofia fear night's darkness but will allow their children to play in the moonlight.
- In the morning, the whole village learns that last night's gong was sounded for the death of a daughter of the clan. She was killed at the market by a neighboring clan and now Okonkwo wants to go to war to get revenge.
- The neighboring clans, however, want to avoid war because they fear the Umuofia. When Okonkwo arrives in the neighboring village of the offending tribe, they offer a peaceful solution of a ritual sacrifice (not killing, but giving up of) of a boy and a virgin girl to the Umuofia clan.
- Okonkwo accepts the virgin girl and the boy - Ikemefuna - and returns home.
- The Umuofia elders decide that the virgin girl should be given to the man whose wife was just murdered. The boy's fate goes undecided, so Okonkwo takes him home in the meantime.
- Ikemefuna ends up living in Okonkwo's household for 3 years.
- We learn that Okonkwo rules his family with an iron fist and his wives live in fear of him. He's got a pretty bad temper. Achebe does a bit of psychoanalysis on Okonkwo and essentially his aggression stems from a deep-seeded, subconscious fear of being a failure like his father.
- Okonkwo recalls how a childhood friend called Okonkwo's father *agbala* - meaning woman or a man without a title.



- Okonkwo's M.O. is hating everything he thinks his dad stood for: gentleness and idleness.
- In an attempt to be completely unlike his father, Okonkwo works hard tilling the fields until dark. His efforts keep his family prosperous.
- As you might expect from a man with three wives, Okonkwo has a child, a twelve-year-old son named Nwoye. Okonkwo, still consumed with fear, beats and chastises his son frequently because he's worried that the boy is lazy. Not a good move.
- At the end of the chapter, the narrative switches to Ikemefuna's point of view. Okonkwo hands the boy over to his first wife and orders her to take care of him.
- Ikemefuna doesn't really understand what's going on. He's just scared and confused.

## Chapter Three

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Unoka, Nwakibie

### Summary

- We begin to get more insights into Okonkwo's past. Unlike his peers, he started out poor and didn't inherit anything from his dad, who was always in debt.
- A common story told in Okonkwo's village is about Okonkwo's father, Unoka, visiting the tribe's oracle, Agbala, to discover why he has such bad harvests.
- The narrative flashes back to Unoka speaking with the oracle many years ago when Okonkwo was still a boy.
- Agbala's priestess interrupts as Unoka begins explaining himself. She says that he has no one but himself to blame for his bad harvests. She points out his laziness in contrast to his neighbors' admirable work ethic and sends him away with simple advice: "go home and work like a man."
- Eventually Unoka gets sick with a disease which causes his stomach to swell. This disease is considered an abomination to the earth so Unoka is not allowed to die at home, nor does ritual allow his body allowed to be buried. He dies and rots under a tree in the Evil Forest.
- Even before his father died, Okonkwo was forced to blaze his own trail to wealth and respect because lazy Unoka could give his son nothing.
- To create his own wealth and reputation, Okonkwo goes to a wealthy man - Nwakibie - and makes polite offerings of palm-wine and kola nut and asks for a favor. Essentially, Okonkwo makes a sharecropping agreement with the wealthy man where he only gets one-third of his harvest and Nwakibie gets the rest.
- Nwakibie is unexpectedly generous to Okonkwo, giving him twice the number of seeds expected because, unlike many young men, Okonkwo isn't afraid of hard work.

- Okonkwo works tirelessly to harvest the yams while his mother and sisters work their own crops. Okonkwo is angry because all this work is going towards feeding his father's household (because his father is lazy) instead of building up his own future.
- The year turns out to be a disaster. There is a long period of drought, killing the first batch of Okonkwo's yams. After he plants the remainder, there is endless flooding so the few yams that actually make it to harvest are rotting.
- But Okonkwo survives the tragic year and vows that he can survive anything due to his "inflexible will."

## Chapter Four

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Ikemefuna, Nwoye, Okonkwo's first wife, Ezeani

### Summary

- Because of his personal merits, Okonkwo has quickly risen to be one of the most highly ranked men in his clan.
- During a meeting of kinsmen, Okonkwo proves himself to have little sympathy for men who have been less successful than himself. When a titleless man contradicts him, he says, "this meeting is for men."
- The other men make Okonkwo apologize to the lower-ranked man and tell Okonkwo that he should be humble and have sympathy for those who are less fortunate.
- The narrator, however, assures the reader that Okonkwo hasn't been successful simply because he's a lucky man; he's worked hard to rise from poverty to his current position.
- The clan respects Okonkwo for his hard work and strong-will, which is why they selected him to go to the offending village to declare war (that was when he ended up taking Ikemefuna and the virgin girl instead).
- The clan assigns Ikemefuna to Okonkwo's care until they decide what to do with him.
- When Ikemefuna moves in to Okonkwo's house, he's terrified and refuses to eat until he's taken home. Okonkwo won't put up with the boy's hunger strike and stands over Ikemefuna with a threatening club, forcing the boy to eat his meal.
- After the force-feeding session, Ikemefuna is sick for a while, but once he's healthy again, he's turns out to be a happy, lively boy.
- Ikemefuna is well-liked in Okonkwo's household. He develops a bond with Nwoye and Okonkwo's first wife, the mother of Nwoye. Even Okonkwo comes to think of Ikemefuna as a son, though he never outwardly shows his affection (surprise, surprise).

- Ikemefuna came to Umuofia around the start of the Week of Peace, the happy interval between harvest and planting.
- During this time, however, Okonkwo breaks the peace. He beats his third wife, Ojiugo, for not arriving home in time to cook his midday meal. By beating his wife, he breaks the law of the Week of Peace. Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess, comes to punish him.
- The priest bashes Okonkwo for violating the rules of the sacred week and possibly making the earth goddess angry. Then he gives Okonkwo instructions for righting his wrong: Okonkwo must bring a sacrifice to the goddess's shrine.
- Okonkwo does as he is told and really does feel repentant, but is too proud to reveal that to his neighbors. So his neighbors think that he's too proud to respect the gods.
- Town gossip reveals that transgression during the Week of Peace rarely happens, so this is big news. Historically, the punishment has also been much more severe.
- After the Week of Peace ends, new crops are planted. Okonkwo starts the arduous process of planting yams with the help of Nwoye and Ikemefuna.
- While preparing the seed yams, he constantly criticizes the boys for not preparing them correctly and threatening them aggressively.
- Okonkwo knows that the boys are too young to really be able to plant yams well, but he's harsh with them because he wants them to turn into tough men.
- After much hard work planting and tending the yams, the rainy season arrives and the boys and Okonkwo remain indoors.
- During his free time, Ikemefuna tells folktales to Nwoye. This is a pretty happy time for Ikemefuna and he finally feels at home in Okonkwo's household.

## Chapter Five

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Ekwefi, Ezinma, Okonkwo's first wife, Obiageli, Ikemefuna, Nkechi

### Summary

- The chapter opens three days before the Feast of the New Yam, and all of the villagers are excited.
- Okonkwo and his family are preparing for the holiday feast, to which Okonkwo will invite the families of his three wives.
- Instead of feeling excited about spending time with his three sets of in-laws, Okonkwo is on edge. Unlike his dad, he's not a happy-go-lucky party guy. Essentially, he's a workaholic and would rather not be sitting around.
- Okonkwo's wives prepare for the festival and feast by cleaning the house, repainting the walls, and primping themselves and the children with body paint and nice hairdos.
- Everyone seems happy except for Okonkwo, who can't suppress his bad mood and takes it out on his second wife, Ekwefi. He accuses her of killing a banana tree (when it's not anywhere near dead), beats her, and then threatens her with a gun when she talks back.
- The rest of the family is too scared to protest.
- Despite Okonkwo's scary, abusive outburst, the feast still goes smoothly. Okonkwo's in-laws arrive with a bunch of palm-wine.
- On the second day of the festival, wrestling matches are scheduled, much to Ekwefi's delight. She fell in love with Okonkwo during the opening match of the book, when he threw the Cat.
- Once the village beauty, Ekwefi couldn't marry Okonkwo because at the time, he was too poor to pay her bride price. So she ran away from home, disobeying her husband, and went to live with Okonkwo.
- Ekwefi has one daughter, a ten-year-old girl named Ezinma. She is a strange child who always speaks her mind, asks lots of questions, and

- even calls her mother by her first name.
- Ekwefi and Ezinma are preparing food on the day of the wrestling match when Okonkwo's first wife comes to ask for Ezinma to bring her a few live coals.
  - Ezinma makes Okonkwo's first wife a fire using the coals and some sticks that she gathered.
  - As Ezinma heads back to her mother's hut, she hears the drums sounding in the *ilo* (which is like a town plaza where events take place). The drums signal that the wrestling will start later, it's a kind of build up to the main event.
  - As Ekwefi and Okonkwo's first wife prepare yams, Ezinma and the women hear Obiageli, the daughter of Okonkwo's first wife, crying.
  - Ikemefuna and the first wife's children come marching in with dinner pots, but Obiageli has no pot and is crying.
  - Obiageli broke her pot while showing off to the other children; she tried to pretend she was a grown woman and carry the pot on her head. However, the little girl makes up a sad story to tell her mother, and though the other children know it's not true, Ikemefuna keeps them silent.
  - Ezinma brings Okonkwo the dinner dish that Ekwefi made. Obiageli brings food that her mother prepared, and Nkechi, the daughter of Okonkwo's third wife, brings another dish.
  - Ezinma is inquisitive with her father, and although he acts stern and unemotional around her, he's secretly has a soft spot for the girl.
  - As the chapter closes, the drums are still sounding.

## Chapter Six

### Characters Involved

Maduka, Ekwefi, Chielo, Ikezue, Okafo

### Summary

- The village attends the wrestling matches. One boy stands out - Maduka, son of Obierika. He defeats his opponent so quickly that most of the audience couldn't even see his winning move.
- Between the boys' and men's matches, Ekwefi speaks to Chielo, the priestess and voice/oracle of the spirit of Agbala.
- Chielo is good friends with Ekwefi and very fond of Ezinma. Their conversation hints that something threatened Ezinma's life as a child, but it has since been overcome.
- The wrestling ends with a rematch between Ikezue and Okafo, two men who had fought to a standstill the year before. Just when it seems this year will end with another draw, Ikezue makes a miscalculation out of desperation, and Okafo throws him - much to the crowd's delight.
- The chapter ends with the villagers singing a song of praise to Okafo.



## Chapter Seven

### Characters Involved

Ikemefuna, Nwoye, Okonkwo, Ezedu

### Summary

- In the three years Ikemefuna has stayed with Okonkwo's family, he has greatly influenced Nwoye.
- Nwoye now takes pleasure in performing the masculine tasks around the household, whereas before Ikemefuna came, he had more of a predilection for the feminine.
- Nwoye truly enjoys "women's" stories, especially folktales like that of Vulture and the Sky. Now, however, now he listens instead to Okonkwo's tales of warfare and head-hunting, both to please Okonkwo and emulate Ikemefuna.
- Okonkwo approves of Nwoye's shift toward the masculine behaviors and entertainment, having worried for years about his tendency to enjoy all things feminine.
- One day while everyone is working, a swarm of locusts darkens the sky. At night, the cloud of locusts descends.
- No need to worry, the locusts are considered a delicious treat among the Umuofia, so the people gather them to feast on for days. (Maybe they're slimy yet satisfying? Or crunchy yet scrumptious?) Anyway, the village rejoices and snacks away.
- While Okonkwo is enjoying his locusts, Ezedu, a respected elder arrives with a message: the village (or rather the Umuofia Oracle) has decided to kill Ikemefuna in punishment of the crime committed long ago against Umuofia. Ezedu advises Okonkwo to obey the command, but have nothing to do with the actual execution, since Ikemefuna "calls you father."
- Okonkwo lies to Ikemefuna, telling him that he's being sent back to his own village. The entire household intuitively senses the truth and reacts somberly,

but can do nothing about it. Even Ikemefuna doesn't really believe he's going home.

- A posse of men, including Okonkwo, "accompanies" Ikemefuna out into the wilderness to take him home (or slaughter him).
- As they walk, Ikemefuna is lulled into a false sense of security, telling himself that Okonkwo is his real father and would do nothing to hurt him. He convinces himself that he is really going home and occupies himself with a childhood song that his biological mother had taught him.
- When the time comes, Okonkwo is told to go to the back of the pack and do nothing.
- The men cut Ikemefuna down with their machetes and Ikemefuna cries out for Okonkwo, calling him "father."
- In reply, Okonkwo steps forward and delivers the killing blow to his adoptive son. (Ikemefuna is all, "Et tu, Brute?" OK, not really, because that's actually Julius Caesar, but the poor kid probably feels the same way.)
- If you're wondering why on earth Okonkwo slashed Ikemefuna, it's a lame macho reason: Okonkwo is afraid of his peers thinking he's weak.
- When Okonkwo returns home, Nwoye immediately knows what's happened and "something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow."
- This is the second time Nwoye has felt this way. The first occasion was the previous year during harvest season when he had heard the voice of an infant crying from the deep woods. It is customary of the Umuofia to discard infant twins in the Evil Forest (because they are considered an abomination to the earth).

## Chapter Eight

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Ekwefi, Ezinma, Obierika, Maduka, Ofoedu, Akueke, Ibe

### Summary

- Okonkwo feels guilty about killing Ikemefuna, which he ought to, according to us.
- Okonkwo doesn't eat anything for two days and just drinks palm-wine.
- Nwoye is now scared of his dad and tries to avoid him.
- When Okonkwo asks Ekwefi to make him a dish, she does it in his favorite way and has Ezinma, his favorite daughter, bring the food to him. Ezinma insists that he eat the entire dish since he hasn't had food for two whole days.
- While he eats, he keeps wishing to himself that Ezinma had been born a boy because, "she has the right spirit."
- Okonkwo desperately wants some work to distract himself with, but he's out of luck because it's the down season for farmers - the time between the harvest and the planting.
- Okonkwo is hard on himself, mentally calling himself a "woman" for his reaction to killing Ikemefuna.
- To make himself feel better, he visits his friend Obierika. Obierika is happy to see his friend because he wants Okonkwo to help him negotiate a bride-price with his daughter's suitor.
- Okonkwo greets Obierika's son, Maduka, the promising young wrestler. On seeing the young man, Okonkwo admits that he's worried about Nwoye. In fact, he's worried that all of his sons are wussies and don't take after him. He reiterates his wish that Ezinma were a boy.
- Okonkwo rattles on some more about Nwoye being soft, and in order to keep his mind off the similarity between his lazy father and Nwoye, Okonkwo revels in his own manliness and his ability to kill Ikemefuna.

- Okonkwo calls Obierika out for not coming with them to kill Ikemefuna. Obierika says he had better things to do and that Okonkwo should have stayed home himself because killing a boy who is like your son doesn't please the Earth goddess.
- Obierika's sharp defense is interrupted by a man named Ofoedu, who clearly has some news that he's dying to share.
- Ofoedu tells the men a strange story about an old man and wife from the neighboring village of Ire. The old man has just recently been found dead in his bed and when his first wife discovered this, she prayed for him. Hours later, the youngest wife went into the bedroom and found the first wife dead beside her husband.
- Obierika comments on the close bond between the two, but Okonkwo sees their relationship as a weakness on the man's part.
- Okonkwo says he's going to leave to tap his palm trees; he wants some work to busy his mind and keep from thinking about Ikemefuna.
- It turns out that high ranking men with titles like Obierika and Okonkwo are forbidden to climb tall palm trees and tap them; they have to have young, titleless men do that work. Obierika thinks the law is stupid and leads to the young, unskilled men killing the palms. Okonkwo counters him, saying the law of the land must be obeyed; the tapping must continue and titled men cannot do it.
- Okonkwo is pretty concerned with titles and wants to keep the title of *ozo* elite and revered, even if it means not tapping the tall palm trees himself.
- Later when Okonkwo returns to Obierika's hut, a suitor and his family are there to ask for Obierika's daughter's (Akueke's) hand in marriage.
- Discussion among the men turns to Obierika's son, Maduka. Everyone admires the young man.
- Akueke, Obierika's daughter, enters with refreshments and shakes hands with her suitor and would-be in-laws.
- Akueke is just sixteen and considered both beautiful and fashionable. She even has "full, succulent breasts" which her suitor certainly doesn't fail to notice.
- The girl returns to her mother's hut where she is scolded and told to remove her waist beads before cooking so they don't catch fire.
- While drinking strong wine provided by the suitor, Ibe, the men fully ignore the topic at hand - settling Akueke's bride price.

- After the drinking, however, they negotiate her bride price by passing back and forth changing numbers of sticks, which represent bags of cowries (shells which serve as a form of monetary exchange).
- The two families finally decide on twenty bags of cowries.
- Next, the men criticize the bride-pricing customs of other tribes - implying other tribes are inferior because they haggle over the brides as if they were livestock or let the women of the family determine the price.
- The scene ends with Obierika talking about white men, who apparently are as colorless as chalk and have no toes.
- One of the men makes a joke, saying that he's seen a white man tons of times, his name is Amadi. So the joke is that Amadi isn't white, he just has leprosy and the euphemism for leprosy is "the white skin."

## Chapter Nine

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Okagbue, Ezinma, Ekwefi

### Summary

- Okonkwo can finally sleep well again. He's feeling like his old self - in other words, he's wondering why on earth killing his adoptive son ever bothered him.
- Just as he's feeling good about himself again, Okonkwo is woken up in the morning by Ekwefi pounding down his door and carrying the message that Ezinma is dying.
- Okonkwo immediately runs to Ekwefi's hut - evidence that Mr. Tough Guy really does care for his little daughter.
- Ezinma is bedridden and feverish. Okonkwo diagnoses her illness as *iba* and goes to gather herbs for a medicine.
- The relationship between Ekwefi and Ezinma is uncommonly close because Ezinma is an only child. Ekwefi values her because she has borne children ten times and nine of the children died in infancy or early childhood.
- After her second child's death, the medicine man diagnosed Ekwefi as bearing *ogbanje* children - changeling children that keep dying and re-entering their mother's wombs to be born again. One way of deterring such unnatural children from coming back was mutilating the dead bodies of the infants in hopes of scaring them away from reentering their mother's womb. So Ekwefi's third child was mutilated after death.
- Ekwefi became sad and bitter because of her misfortune, but her next child born was Ezinma, who was sickly but surprisingly hardy.
- Though Ezinma survived past her early years, she was always periodically sick. The town believes that Ezinma is an *ogbanje*, but they hope that she has decided to stay and give up the evil cycle of birth and death.

- Ekwefi lives in constant fear that her beloved daughter will not choose to stay with her.
- A year ago, Ezinma underwent the process of breaking her ties with the *ogbanje* world - finding and digging up her *iyi-uwa*, a special kind of stone that connects an *ogbanje* child to the spirit world and allows her to be reborn repeatedly.
- We enter into a flashback to the time when Ezinma's *iyi-uwa* was found.
- In order to find the location of the girl's *iyi-uwa*, a wise old medicine man named Okagbue questions Ezinma about where she buried the stone. He insists that she knows the location.
- Ezinma takes Okagbue, followed by her parents and many villagers, on a bit of a wild goose chase. She confidently walks away from home and goes through brush and branches only to bring everyone straight back to her father's hut. She was probably having a bit of fun with this, especially since Okagbue wouldn't let Okonkwo threaten or beat the girl for her antics.
- Back at her father's hut, Ezinma stops at an orange tree and indicates it is the spot.
- Okagbue and Okonkwo dig for a long time before finding something wrapped in a dirty rag.
- When he unwraps it, a shiny pebble falls out and there is much rejoicing. Okagbue asks Ezinma if this is her *iyi-uwa* and she answers yes.
- The flashback ends and the legitimacy of the ritual is called into question now, a year later, when Ezinma's life appears threatened by an intense fever.
- Okonkwo returns gathering herbs to heal his little daughter. He then boils the medicinal roots, barks, and leaves, warning Ekwefi to watch the pot carefully so it doesn't boil over. He is snappy and anxious.
- Once the medicinal concoction has boiled long enough, Okonkwo wakes Ezinma and forces her to sit over the steaming pot of medicine covered by a blanket. Essentially, she's stuck in an aromatherapy steam room.
- Though Ezinma complains and cries and struggles to be let loose from the choking steam, she is held down.

- When Okonkwo finally releases her, the girl is drenched with sweat and falls asleep.
- At this point, the narrator leaves us hanging. We don't get to find out whether Ezinma lives or dies. (If you're the kind of person who really can handle suspense, you might want to jump to Chapter Eleven.)



## Chapter Ten

### Characters Involved

Mgbafo, Odukwe, Okonkwo, Uzowulu

### Summary

- The village performs an interesting ceremony which draws the attention of a large crowd. The narrator specifies that the ceremony is for men; women watch only from the peripheries.
- Two small groups of people face off as drums beat. One group consists of a woman, Mgbafo, and her brothers, the other group is Mgbafo's husband, Uzowulu, and his family.
- A gong sounds, signaling the beginning of the ritual, and the audience looks towards the *egwugwu* house, or the building that's supposed to be the dwelling place of the Umuofia gods.
- With the sounding of the gong, the spirits of the Umuofia ancestors come out of the forest and the nine Umuofia gods appear.
- Achebe doesn't mean for us to think that real spirits are showing up. The *egwugwu* take the form of masked men and when they arrive and the narrator notes that one of them has a springy step much like Okonkwo. Basically, we're meant to guess that the nine *egwugwu* are actually masked elders of the clan.
- The nine gods - one for each of the nine Umuofia villages - are pretty freaky. The main god is called the Evil Forest, which seems a rather fitting name for a dude who has smoke pouring from his head.
- The *egwugwu* sit down and formally greet Uzowulu and Mgbafo's oldest brother. Then the gods open the floor for Uzowulu to present his complaint.
- Uzowulu accuses the other side (his brothers-in-law) of coming to his house, beating him up, and taking away his wife and children. Furthermore, he asserts that his wife's family refused to return the bride price - the traditional compensation for a runaway wife.

- Odukwe, Mgbafo's eldest brother presents his sister's case. He refutes Uzowulu, justifying he and his brothers' actions by claiming that Uzowulu treated Mgbafo violently, beating her unnecessarily and excessively, to the point where she miscarried a baby.
- Uzowulu interjects to insist that Mgbafo miscarried when she slept with her lover. The *egwugwu* point out that no lover would sleep with a pregnant woman.
- Mgbafo's brothers claim that when they stole their sister away, it was because Uzowulu was about to beat her to death. The brothers also threaten that if their brother-in-law "ever beats her again we shall cut off his genitals for him." Now there's a deterrent.
- Uzowulu's neighbors are called as witnesses, and they agree that the man has been beating his wife.
- After the *egwugwu* consult in private, they declare their sentence. Uzowulu is commanded to go to his in-laws with an offering of wine and beg his wife to return. He is not to beat her anymore.
- The in-laws, similarly, are told to return the wife to Uzowulu if he brings them wine.
- This decides the case and another group steps forward to present their dispute over land to the *egwugwu*.

## Chapter Eleven

### Characters Involved

Ezinma, Chielo, Okonkwo, Ekwefi

### Summary

- Ezinma survived her fever!
- Ekwefi and Ezinma take turns telling folktales during a moonless night.
- Ekwefi tells a story about crafty Tortoise and his wily maneuverings and sweet-talking to get to a feast in heaven.
- Ezinma is unhappy with her mother's tale because "there is no song in the story." The girl begins to tell her own tale.
- She is interrupted by the high-pitched cries of Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, screaming prophecies.
- Chielo comes to Okonkwo and demands to see Ezinma. Ekwefi, overhearing, feels a stab of fear.
- Okonkwo tries to get Chielo to come back in the morning, but apparently Agbala wants to see "his daughter" (Chielo implies Ezinma is Agbala's daughter, not Okonkwo's), and Okonkwo should watch out because he's exchanging words with a god (Agbala) through Chielo.
- Okonkwo's wives come out of their huts to meet Chielo while the children watch from the sidelines.
- Chielo insists that Agbala wants to see Ezinma in his cave in the hills. When Ekwefi says she wants to come too, Chielo curses her.
- Chielo, clearly in a strange state, tells Ezinma to climb on her back. Ezinma, crying from fear, obeys while her distraught parents watch, helpless to oppose the will of the god.
- Chielo spirits Ezinma away without any explanation.
- Ekwefi, in a show of strength, steels herself and follows them. Okonkwo does nothing to stop her.
- Ekwefi becomes more and more afraid as she pursues the priestess and her abducted daughter.

- While following the priestess's path, Ekwefi takes some time to consider what she will do when they reach their final destination. Ekwefi feels too frightened to follow them into Agbala's cave and begins thinking of terrifying "evil essences" that are loose in the woods.
- The moonless night frightens Ekwefi, and Chielo seems to have supernatural strength and speed, moving rapidly and tirelessly through the underbrush. The priestess also knows that she is being followed and threatens the pursuer with the wrath of the god Agbala. Yet Ekwefi persists.
- Chielo keeps up her steady pace and leads her pursuer through a village and then back into the eerie woods, continuing her strange, possessed chanting.
- To Ekwefi, Chielo no longer seems to be the kind woman who is her friend. Right now, Chielo is rather inhumane - the frightening priestess of Agbala.
- Late into the night, after the moon has risen, Chielo finally reaches her destination, the shrine of Agbala and disappears into a small entrance in the ground, with Ezinma still on her back. Ekwefi, sick with fear, vows that she will defend her daughter to the death. And she waits outside the entrance for them to return.
- As she waits, Okonkwo shows up with a machete in hand. At the sight of him, Ekwefi knows Ezinma will be safe. He sits down to wait with her.
- The chapter ends with Ekwefi recalling the day she ran away to elope with Okonkwo. She had been married to another man, Anene, for two years but walked right up to Okonkwo's door. He carried her inside, started to take off her clothes, and the rest is history...or private.

## Chapter Twelve

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Okonkwo's first wife, Okonkwo's third wife, Ekwefi, Ezinma, Akueke, Ibe

### Summary

- The village is preparing to celebrate the engagement of Obierika's daughter and Okonkwo's first and third wives are getting ready to bring gifts of food Obierika's wife. Ekwefi, however, is exhausted after chasing Chielo all night.
- The previous night, Chielo had crawled out of the shrine with Ezinma sleeping on her back and transported the girl safely back to the village. Okonkwo and Ekwefi had followed the priestess at a safe distance.
- Ezinma emerges from her mother's hut, having just woken up. She prepares to gather water with the other children to bring to Obierika's wife.
- Okonkwo's first and third wives leave to go to Obierika's place and promise to explain why Ekwefi will be late.
- Okonkwo is grumpy because he spent the whole night worrying about Ezinma. Last night, he was torn between his desire to appear masculinely aloof and his fatherly instinct to protect his daughter. After Ekwefi left to chase after Chielo, Okonkwo had set out after them, but only found them on his fourth trip out, at which point he was sick with worry.
- At Obierika's compound, party preparations keep everyone as busy - the village is preparing a celebratory feast.
- As some men discuss how magic medicine helps the market of neighboring village, Umuike, flourish and draw tons of people.
- The discussion turns to how magic can also aid thieves in stealing cows. As they speak, a cow (of all things!) actually gets loose. All the women chase after the escaped animal and secure it. After all the

commotion, the owner of the cow pays the fine required as penalty for setting a cow loose on a neighbor's property.

- Later in the day, the groom's family brings the last of the bride price to the celebration - pots of palm-wine. The women of the house drink some wine, including the bride, Akueke, who is getting all dolled up for the celebration.
- Obierika's guests begin to arrive, followed by the new in-laws (the groom's family).
- Though Obierika's family worried that the in-laws would be a bit stingy, altogether, the groom's family brings fifty pots of wine - a good showing since only thirty were expected.
- Obierika's family formally gives away Akueke to the suitor, Ibe, and establishes an alliance between the two families. The crowd witnesses and confirms the union.
- Everyone feasts.
- The night ends with the girls dancing, led by the newlywed bride.
- Before the groom's family leaves, taking Akueke with them, Okonkwo gives them a gift of two roosters.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Obierika, Ezedu's sixteen-year-old son

### Summary

- Drums and cannons sound and women wail, signaling the death of the oldest man in the village, Ezedu. He was the man who warned Okonkwo to "bear no hand in [Ikemefuna's] death."
- Ezedu's funeral is a big deal because he was one of the head honchos of the Umuofia. Even the ancestral spirits, the *egwugwu*, come to pay their respects and lament.
- During the final salute, when the drums sound loudly and guns and cannons are fired, an accident occurs.
- Ezedu's sixteen-year-old son falls dead from a gunshot through the heart. He and his brothers had been performing a final dance to honor their father.
- The offending gun is Okonkwo's.
- The Umuofia consider killing a clansman a horrible crime, one that offends the earth goddess. But, since the boy's death was clearly an accident (considered female because it was unintentional), Okonkwo only receives the punishment of exile from the Umuofia villages for seven years.
- Okonkwo must spend his seven years of banishment in his motherland (literally, the land from which his mother comes), a village called Mbanta.
- That same night, Okonkwo and his weeping wives and children pack their belongings.
- Just after Okonkwo and his family leave, a group of men, including Okonkwo's best friend, Obierika, destroy Okonkwo's home and slaughter his livestock.
- The narrator makes it clear that Obierika doesn't join the destruction out of spite; he and the other men feel the need to cleanse the land of

Okonkwo's crime to satisfy the earth goddess.

- Obierika clearly sympathizes with Okonkwo. He asks himself "why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently?" Yet, in the end, Obierika can do nothing to oppose the law of the Earth.



## Chapter Fourteen

### Characters Involved

Uchendu, Okonkwo

### Summary

- Uchendu, Okonkwo's maternal uncle, welcomes Okonkwo and his family to Mbanta. Uchendu is the oldest member of the family and remembers Okonkwo as a boy when he returned to Mbanta for his mother's funeral.
- Though Uchendu wasn't expecting to see his nephew, he can immediately read from Okonkwo's face what happened.
- The day after Okonkwo's arrival in Mbanta, he tells his uncle about the crime that he committed. As you might imagine, Uchendu's feeling pretty relieved that Okonkwo committed the "female" version of murder - if a murder is going to live among your family, it's reassuring to know that he killed inadvertently.
- Uchendu and his sons help Okonkwo build a compound and farm. The family even pitches in to give Okonkwo seed-yams to start a farm with the coming rain season.
- Okonkwo, deeply perturbed by his exile, works as hard as always to prosper, but his heart is no longer in it. All his ambition to eventually become a great leader of the clan has been ripped away. He believes his personal god or *chi* was not destined for great things.
- Uchendu sees Okonkwo's despair. He decides that after the marriage of his youngest son, he'll talk to Okonkwo.
- All that remains before Uchendu's son can be married is the last ceremony - the confession of the bride, in which the woman confesses if she has slept with any other men. If she hasn't, she can marry.
- The final marriage ceremony goes smoothly and the young woman becomes Uchendu's daughter-in-law.
- Two days later, Uchendu gathers his family (including Okonkwo) around him. Uchendu tells his family why Okonkwo is now living

among them.

- Next, Uchendu addresses Okonkwo. He asks his nephew why a common name for children is Nneka, meaning "Mother is supreme" when only men can be the head of a family. Okonkwo answers that he doesn't know.
- Uchendu goes on to inquire why women are buried with their own kinsmen and not those of their husband. Again, Okonkwo does not know.
- Uchendu uses Okonkwo's ignorance to call him a child and then proceeds to answer the questions himself.
- He says that mothers protect their children unconditionally and that is why mothers are supreme. In times of trouble, children always go to their mother for comfort and protection.
- Similarly, now that Okonkwo is going through hard times, he is in his motherland for protection. But by despairing, Okonkwo is like a child refusing to allow his mother to comfort him. Uchendu points out that Okonkwo's behavior in his motherland displeases the dead and dishonors his mother.
- Uchendu asserts that if Okonkwo continues on his present path, he will condemn himself and his whole family to death in exile.
- Lastly, Uchendu puts Okonkwo in his place by pointing out that other men have suffered far worse than a measly seven years of exile.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Obierika, Uchendu, Okonkwo's first wife, Nwoye

### Summary

- In the second year of Okonkwo's exile, Obierika comes to visit him bringing along two men carrying bags of cowries (money).
- Uchendu, upon meeting Obierika, comments that it's rare to have such a visit since the young men nowadays don't often maintain relationships with their neighboring tribes.
- Okonkwo, Uchendu, and Obierika settle in with some conversation and palm-wine.
- Obierika brings news that one of the clans - Abame - has been completely wiped out. The cause: white man.
- When the Abame clan came across a lone white man with on an "iron horse" (a bicycle), they were struck by his inability to communicate with them. Their oracle declared that the man would destroy the clan and that he was the first of many white men to come. So they killed him and tied his iron horse to a tree "because it looked as if it would run away to call the man's friends." Later that year, a trio of white men arrived, led by clansmen. They saw the iron horse, freaked out, and left. At the market a few weeks later, the entire clan was surrounded and massacred by a group the white men and their native allies. In the end, the oracle's prophesy came true.
- Uchendu reacts with rage and the knowledge that people should never kill a man who doesn't speak. The white man's inability to communicate, we understand, is unnatural and ominous. He backs up this advice with a folktale which ends with the wisdom that "There is nothing to fear from someone who shouts."
- Obierika ends the conversation by expressing his fear of the white men. He had never believed the stories he'd heard about white men

with their guns and slaves. Uchendu cautions that, "There is no story that is not true."

- Okonkwo's first wife cooks them dinner and Nwoye brings wine.
- Over dinner, Obierika catches Okonkwo up on the latest news from their home village.
- After the men finish eating, Obierika tells Okonkwo that the bags of cowries he brought are the earnings Okonkwo's abandoned yams fields. Obierika sold the yams, and intends to do the same for every year until Okonkwo returns.
- Okonkwo is very thankful to his friend for the help and money, and the two men continue to exchange news and jokes. The tone is friendly but slightly tense. One of the jokes cracked is about killing your son to pay back a debt.

## Chapter Sixteen

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Nwoye, Obierika, The Missionaries

### Summary

- Two years later, Obierika visits Okonkwo in Mbanta again. This time, his visit is motivated by less pleasant reasons.
- Not only have white missionaries arrived in Umuofia and begun converting some clansmen to their faith, but alarmingly, Nwoye - Okonkwo's eldest son - is one of the converts!
- We get a flashback to Obierika discovering that Nwoye is among the Christian converts.
- Obierika asks Nwoye what on earth he's doing among the missionaries, and Nwoye responds that he has joined them.
- When Obierika asks after his father, Nwoye responds sadly that Okonkwo isn't his father anymore.
- The flashback ends.
- Okonkwo refuses to discuss Nwoye.
- Despite Okonkwo's silence on the subject, Obierika pieces together the story of Nwoye and the missionaries from Okonkwo's first wife. We get a flashback about what occurred.
- Six missionaries arrive in Mbanta - five natives and one white man - causing a lot of commotion in the village. Everyone is curious about the white man after having heard the story about the Abame clan massacre.
- With a large group gathered, the white missionary begins speaking with the aid of a translator, an African using a different Igbo dialect to the people of Mbanta.
- The villagers make fun of the translator because instead of saying "myself" he always says "my buttocks"!
- The missionaries' message is that there is only one true God and that the people of Mbanta are worshiping false gods. The true God judges

everyone after death and throws those who worship false gods into a fire. Those who worship the true God get eternal life in "His happy kingdom."

- The white men also tempt the Igbo people to their side by offering them iron horses (bicycles) - once the missionaries come to permanently live among them. This last bit causes a stir. The people haven't expected that white men would come to stay in Mbanta.
- When an old man asks which of the Igbo gods - the earth goddess, sky god, or various others - is the aforementioned one true God, the white man claims that *all* of the Igbo gods are all false.
- At this point, the men of Mbanta laugh and ignore the missionaries.
- The missionaries begin to sing and their song tells the story of "brothers who lived in darkness and in fear, ignorant of the love of God" and of man being like lost sheep, away from their kind shepherd (God).
- Okonkwo, listening to the missionaries, concludes that they must be insane. The only reason he sticks around to listen to them talk is that he's hoping the men of Mbanta will decide to chase all of the missionaries out - he'd like to join in on that action.
- Unlike his father, Nwoye is enraptured. Though he doesn't understand the logic of Christianity - especially the Trinity - the song touches him. He associates it with the death of Ikemefuna and Igbo twins abandoned in the woods. The missionaries' hymn gives him a feeling of relief.

## Chapter Seventeen

### Characters Involved

Uchendu, The Missionaries, Mr. Kiaga, Nneka, Okonkwo, Nwoye

### Summary

- The missionaries don't seem to have much intention of leaving, and preach by day and sleep in the marketplace by night.
- Within the first week of their arrival, the missionaries ask the rulers of Mbanta for land on which to build their church. Uchendu agrees, but gives them a section of the Evil Forest. No one in town wants the missionaries to stay, and they assume that any person with any intelligence wouldn't live in the Evil Forest.
- The respected men of Mbanta think that giving the missionaries a piece of the Evil Forest is a good joke. As Uchendu says, the missionaries "boast about victory over death. Let us give them a real battlefield on which to show their victory."
- The missionaries are so happy to have the land that they start singing. That wasn't quite the reaction the men of Mbanta were expecting.
- The villagers expect the missionaries, who are busy clearing forest land for their church, to die quickly. But they don't.
- The explanation for the missionaries' success in the Evil Forest is that the white man with them can see the evil spirits through his glasses and communicate with them.
- When none of the missionaries die, they win their first three converts.
- During these first few weeks, Nwoye shadows the missionaries and lingers outside their church, but can't muster the courage to enter because of (justifiable) fear of his father.
- The white missionary's interpreter, Mr. Kiaga, has become the head of the new Mbanta church because the white man set up headquarters in Umuofia.
- Mr. Kiaga invites everyone in the village to come worship at the church every Sunday.

- Many of the villagers are still unsure about what the Igbo gods will do to the missionaries living in the Evil Forest. The gods sometimes let men do as they like to see if the humans will continue to defy them. However, the gods always exact revenge within 28 days.
- The 28th day is fast approaching and the villagers eagerly watch and wait. Some converts even temporarily un-convert.
- The 28th day arrives and Mr. Kiaga and the church are doing fine. They even win some more converts, including a pregnant woman named Nneka.
- Nneka had previously given birth to four sets of twins, all of which were abandoned to the Evil Forest.
- Okonkwo discovers though the grapevine that Nwoye has been hanging around the Christians and the news enrages him.
- When Nwoye comes home, Okonkwo grabs the young man by the throat and angrily asks him where he's been.
- Nwoye doesn't answer and Okonkwo starts beating him with a stick and threatening to kill him.
- Uchendu arrives and tells Okonkwo to let go of Nwoye, which Okonkwo does.
- Nwoye wisely leaves. He heads straight to the church and Mr. Kiaga to tell the church leader that he's moving to Umuofia and join the white missionary's school where he will learn to read and write.
- Nwoye is glad to be rid of his father, though he vows to return to convert his mother and siblings.
- Okonkwo is enraged and greatly troubled by Nwoye's betrayal. He tries to calm himself by telling himself that Nwoye isn't worth fighting for.
- Okonkwo blames his bad fortune - his exile and worthless son - on his *chi* or personal god.
- Part of the reason Okonkwo is so angry about Nwoye's new religion is that he considers Christianity weak and effeminate, and we know how important manliness is to Okonkwo.
- Okonkwo sees his father in Nwoye and can't believe that he could father a son who's so much like "a woman."
- In the end, Okonkwo realizes that "Living fire begets cold, impotent ash."



## Chapter Eighteen

### Characters Involved

Mr. Kiaga, Okonkwo, Okoli

### Summary

- At first, the people of Mbanta and the Christians are able to live together in peace because the missionaries stay in the Evil Forest and mostly mind their own business. However, as the group of converts grows in size and strength, confrontations between the Christians and villagers start to occur.
- One day, some converts come into the village and threaten to burn down the shrines to the village's gods. This behavior enrages the villagers, and the men beat the converts bloody.
- There are also rumors that the white people are not only spreading their religion, but their government as well. This means courts to prosecute Igbo for killing converts and missionaries.
- But in Mbanta, these governments are still a myth. The villagers continue to see Mr. Kiaga as a harmless fool, and wouldn't even consider killing the converts because that would mean exile for killing a clansman.
- The missionaries really start bother the clan when they welcome Igbo outcasts - similar to the Hindi untouchable caste - into the church.
- When the outcasts first enter the church, hoping to be accepted and converted, the native converts protest, worried that the "heathens" in town will ridicule the converts for accepting the outcasts.
- However, Mr. Kiaga, the head missionary, preaches tolerance and views the outcasts as brothers under God. His only stipulation is that they shave off their mark of ostracism - their long tangled hair
- The outcasts acquiesce and soon become the strongest adherents to the church.
- Then an incident occurs which proves to be a turning point. The royal python, the most revered animal among all the Igbo peoples, is killed

by one of the converts. This is a crime so heinous that it was previously unimaginable and has never happened before.

- Okonkwo wants to react with violence, but the elders gloss over the crime. In the end, they decide on the milder punishment of ostracizing the Christians.
- Okonkwo, though frustrated by the perceived weakness of the Mbanta people, holds his tongue.
- The Christians in Mbanta are now a rather large group, which is surprising considering that the first missionaries came to Mbanta only a year and a half ago.
- When the female converts go to the river to get water to clean the church for their Easter celebrations, they are chased away. When Mr. Kiaga asks why they weren't allowed to collect water, the women answer that the village has made all Christians outlaws.
- Mr. Kiaga wants to know why they have been banished, and the women respond that it's because the village believes that a convert, Okoli, killed the royal python.
- After the village decided to outlaw the Christians, Okoli is found dead from illnesses.
- The Mbanta people interpret Okoli's death as a sign that their own gods are fighting back.
- Happy to let the gods settle the conflict, the Mbanta people take no further action against the Christians.

## Chapter Nineteen

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Ekwefi, Ezinma, Obiageli, An Elder

### Summary

- As his term of exile draws to a close, Okonkwo bitterly regrets his seven years of banishment, seeing them as a lost opportunity to improve his standing in his fatherland of Umuofia.
- Knowing that his time in Mbanta is coming to an end, Okonkwo sends money to Obierika to build some temporary huts for him in Umuofia in preparation for his return.
- Okonkwo impatiently waits through the wet season - the last months of his required stay in Mbanta.
- As the rain season draws to a close, Okonkwo decides to throw a farewell feast for the Mbanta people, to show his gratitude.
- Okonkwo puts Ekwefi in charge of preparing cassava for the feast.
- Two of Okonkwo's daughters, Ezinma and Obiageli, gather cassava tubers a few days before the scheduled feast.
- Okonkwo's final feast is noted for its copious amounts of food - it's almost like a wedding celebration. Okonkwo serves to impress.
- Though the feast is a show of gratitude, Okonkwo also emphasizes that the gathering is justified merely because "it is good for kinsmen to meet."
- At the end of the feast, one of the elders speaks up and gives a warning to the younger generation. He fears for them because he feels the bonds of kinship are breaking, which allows Christianity to pollute their land and steal their men from their gods and their families.
- With that ominous note, he thanks Okonkwo for his generosity.

## Chapter Twenty

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Obierika, Ezinma, The Missionaries

### Summary

- "Seven years was a long time to be away from one's clan."
- Okonkwo realizes that he's probably lost his high position in his fatherland; someone else probably took his place as one of the nine masked spirits and he's probably no longer in a position to lead his clan into war against the Christians.
- Despite long exile, Okonkwo has been planning his return basically since he was banished. He envisions rebuilding his compound with space for two more wives.
- Essentially, he has grand plans for himself as displaying his wealth and power in numerous ways and sees himself as being given the highest possible title. This seems pretty much like wishful thinking.
- His loss of Nwoye doesn't alter his grand schemes much. After Nwoye's conversion to Christianity, Okonkwo gathers the rest of his five sons together and issues an ultimatum. If any of them want to be a woman, they can follow Nwoye now, but he will disown and curse them, then haunt them when he dies. Harsh!
- Okonkwo still wishes that Ezinma was a boy, because she understands him very well.
- During the long exile, Ezinma has grown into a gorgeous young woman known in Mbanta as the "Crystal of Beauty."
- Ezinma has had many offers of marriage, but has refused them all because Okonkwo said he wants her, and all of his other daughters, to marry a man in Umuofia.
- Okonkwo anticipates that on his return to Umuofia, his two beautiful grown daughters - Ezinma and Obiageli - will attract the attention of powerful men, increasing his status in his fatherland.

- Upon returning to Umuofia, Okonkwo discovers that the Christians have gained a lot of ground. Now, their congregation doesn't consist only of outcasts and low-born members of society, but also some titled men.
- The white missionary is very pleased with himself, and even has held the first Holy Communion.
- The dreaded government has also become a reality in Okonkwo's fatherland and there is now a District Commissioner to judge cases.
- Court messengers, who are called *kotma* by the Igbo people, beat those who offend the white men. The *kotma* are despised and because of their uniform of grey shorts, they are derisively called Ashy-Buttocks (ha!).
- When discussing the white man's invasion with Obierika, Okonkwo despairs. He doesn't understand why his people don't fight back.
- Okonkwo believes that throwing the white men out town wouldn't be difficult.
- Obierika points out that throwing the white people out wouldn't be easy because so many men of Umuofia have joined the ranks of the Christians. Since the religion is intertwined with the government, the converts by default must support the government.
- The Christians have compromised the unity of the clan and has made them fall apart. In Obierika's own words, "He [the white men] has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." This is the first (and only) reference to the title of the book.
- Obierika tells Okonkwo of a man of Umuofia, Aneto, who was even hanged by the white men. The white court settled a land dispute in favor of the man who gave them money. Aneto ended up killing the man who was taking his land, and as he tried to flee (like Okonkwo had done). But the white men took him and hanged him.
- The court interfered and prevented the clan's traditional process of justice.

## Chapter Twenty-One

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Mr. Brown, Akunna

### Summary

- Although Okonkwo strongly believes that the white men should be forced out of Umuofia, not everyone in town agrees. The white men have brought trading stores, goods, and money to the area, which many of the villagers appreciate.
- Not all of the missionaries are bad. The white missionary in Umuofia, Mr. Brown, is well respected.
- Mr. Brown does everything in his power to keep his flock of converts from harassing the clan. He doesn't appreciate fanaticism and tries to prevent his converts from going off in the direction of extremism. When trying to convert people, he speaks logically and respectfully.
- This chapter recounts such a conversation between Mr. Brown and Akunna, a respected man of the clan. The two men frequently visit with each other to speak about religion, although neither has been able to convert the other to his side.
- Akunna finds parallels between Christianity and the Igbo polytheistic belief system. He argues that the two are not so different after all.
- Akunna calls Mr. Brown and his *kotma* the human messengers of their God, and equates the men to the lesser gods in the Igbo pantheon who serve the supreme god, Chukwu. One must approach Chukwu or God through the lesser vehicles first out of fear and respect. Only when those channels fail does one directly address the supreme god.
- Mr. Brown uses his new understanding of the Igbo faith to convert people. He realizes that a direct attack on their gods will not work and instead goes from family to family, begging them to send their children to the missionary school. Those that agree are rewarded with official positions; they become court messengers or clerks or schoolteachers.

- The year that Okonkwo returns to Umuofia, Mr. Brown leaves for health reasons.
- Okonkwo is distressed because his return doesn't cause the great stir he had imagined since his exile.
- The missionaries - their church, their government, and their trading stores - are occupying much of the Igbo's thoughts and time.
- Though his daughters receive good marriage proposals and his sons gain titles, Okonkwo spends most of his time lamenting that the formerly warlike men of Umuofia have become too soft and womanly to resist the Christians.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### Characters Involved

Mr. Smith, Enoch, The *egwugwu*, Okeke, Ajofia

### Summary

- Mr. Brown is replaced by Mr. Smith who, in modern terms, would be deemed a religious fanatic. He sees things as black and white, with black being evil. Unlike Mr. Brown, he has no tolerance for traditional Igbo practices or beliefs.
- Mr. Smith thinks Mr. Brown focused on getting lots of converts instead of spending time teaching his converts a deep understanding of the Christian religion. He sees many of the new Christians as little better than the heathens.
- With Mr. Smith in town, the more zealous converts get free rein to act on their fanaticism.
- Enoch - a proud, zealous, and belligerent convert - commits the ultimate crime. During the worship of the earth goddess, he taunts one of the *egwugwu*, saying that the masked "spirit" wouldn't dare touch a Christian. In response, the *egwugwu* smacks Enoch with a cane. But Enoch retaliates by publicly unmasking the *egwugwu*! This is akin to killing a god.
- That night, the Mother of the Spirits loudly weeps throughout the town, mourning the death of her dead son - the unmasked *egwugwu*. "It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming - its own death."
- The next day all the *egwugwu* gather to seek vengeance on Enoch. They storm the village, destroying Enoch's compound and then head to the church.
- In the meantime, Mr. Smith, after much prayer, has decided to hide Enoch from the clan's wrath. However, he almost buckles with fear when he sees the terrifying masked *egwugwu* approaching. The



previous night, Mr. Smith had also been freaked out when he heard the wailing Mother of Spirits.

- Mr. Smith and his interpreter, Okeke, stand their ground outside the church.
- The *egwugwu* rush Mr. Smith and Okeke and surround them.
- The head of the *egwugwu* - Ajofia - speaks to the interpreter, telling him that the white man should go home. They will not harm him, but they cannot allow the church to stand anymore.
- When Mr. Smith tells them to leave this house of God, Okeke wisely and deliberately mistranslates the message. He merely asks the *egwugwu* to leave matters in Mr. Smith's hands.
- They refuse. Though they do not kill any of the Christians, they burn the church to the ground.
- "And for the moment the spirit of the clan was pacified."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, The District Commissioner, Mr. Smith, The *kotma*, The *egwugwu*

### Summary

- Of course, Okonkwo was one of the *egwugwu* who had advised violence. The destruction of the church makes him happy - it's like the "good old days" are returning.
- For the two days after the destruction of the church, all of the men of Umuofia carry weapons in case the white men try to retaliate.
- Upon the return of the District Commissioner, Mr. Smith immediately goes to voice his complaint.
- Five days after the church was burned, Okonkwo and five other Umuofia leaders are invited to speak to District Commissioner to discuss the confrontation. Though they arrive armed - at Okonkwo's suggestion - they fall prey to an ambush.
- In a move of shameful trickery, the District Commissioner has them all arrested and imprisoned.
- The District Commissioner sets out to show the men who's boss. In the District Commissioner's own words: "We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice just as it is done in my own country under a great queen. I have brought you here because you joined together to molest others, to burn people's houses and their place of worship. That must not happen in the dominion of our queen, the most powerful ruler in the world."
- All of a sudden, the men of Umuofia are subject to England's system of justice and queen.
- The District Commissioner sets the price of their release at *two hundred* bags of cowries (yikes!).
- The imprisoned men don't respond.

- Though the District Commissioner tells the *kotma* to treat the prisoners with respect, these guards have their own agenda.
- The *kotma* shave off their prisoners' hair and starve them for three days straight.
- On the third day when Okonkwo snarls that they should've killed the white men in retaliation for Enoch's crime, the *kotma* overhear and beat Okonkwo for his impertinence.
- The *kotma* tell the villagers that they must pay two hundred and fifty bags of cowries for their leaders' release. Otherwise, the men will be hung.
- Wild rumors spread about what will happen if the bail (or ransom?) isn't paid. Some say that the whole town will be annihilated like the Abame.
- The village has a strange, deserted air about it. It's a night of the full moon, which is usually a time of much activity, but the village is silent and the feeling is ominous.
- The next morning, the village gathers together the two hundred and fifty bags of cowries. What the clan doesn't know is that fifty of those bags are snatched by the *kotma*, who have deliberately raised the price first set by the District Commissioner so that they could take a cut.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### Characters Involved

Okonkwo, Ezinma, Obierika, Egonwanne, Okika, The *kotma*

### Summary

- Upon their release, Okonkwo and the other five men go silently home.
- At home, Ezinma cooks Okonkwo a meal, and Okonkwo is met by his male relations and Obierika. The men are mostly silent, but can see by the marks on his back that Okonkwo has been whipped while in jail.
- That night, the village crier beats his gong to signal that there will be a village meeting in the morning.
- The question of war is in the air.
- Before going to bed, Okonkwo takes out his war dress. He vows vengeance for the shameful way he was treated by the white men and their court. Even if Umuofia decides not to go to war, he vows to avenge himself.
- Okonkwo thinks nostalgically of the past, when the men of Umuofia were fierce and dreaded warriors.
- Okonkwo despises Egonwanne, a man whose silver tongue usually convinces the Umuofia not to go to war against the white man. Okonkwo considers him a coward.
- The next morning, the entire village congregates to hear the war decision. The marketplace is crammed with people.
- Okonkwo arrives with Obierika and spots Egonwanne.
- When Obierika asks if Okonkwo is afraid of Egonwanne persuading the village not to fight, Okonkwo goes into super macho mode. Okonkwo assures Obierika that he's completely indifferent about the despicable Egonwanne, and that he himself will fight even if the clan chooses not to.
- Okika, one of the six humiliated leaders, speaks to the crowd. He points out that times are dire - their gods are weeping and their clan is divided, joining up with strangers and forsaking their ancestors. Okika

urges the Umuofia to go to war, even though it will mean fighting against their brothers who have joined the white men.

- But just then, five *kotma* arrive. (Uh-oh).
- Okonkwo confronts the *kotma*, trembling with rage.
- The fearless head messenger tells him that the white man has ordered their meeting to stop.
- This enrages Okonkwo and, in a flash, he draws his machete and decapitates the man.
- The crowd behind him is in tumult, but makes no move to catch the other four *kotma*.
- Okonkwo now knows that the Umuofia will not go to war because they let the other *kotma* escape.
- He cleans off his machete and walks away.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

### Characters Involved

Obierika, The District Commissioner, The *kotma*

### Summary

- The District Commissioner and his guards arrive at Okonkwo's compound, demanding to see Okonkwo.
- A small group of men is sitting there, but not Okonkwo.
- The District Commissioner gets all hot and bothered when the men say that Okonkwo isn't there, and he threatens to jail the men.
- Obierika agrees to take the District Commissioner and his guards to Okonkwo. Still all snippy, the District Commissioner warns Obierika that if he tries anything tricky, he'll be shot.
- In a small opening in the compound, the District Commissioner sees Okonkwo dangling from a tree. He has committed suicide.
- Obierika asks them to help them take down the body. Since it is an abomination for a man to take his own life, his corpse is now considered evil and only strangers may touch it. The Umuofia will pay the missionaries to take down and bury Okonkwo's body; then they will perform the proper rituals to consecrate the polluted land.
- Looking at Okonkwo's body, Obierika loses his composure and blurts out, "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..."
- His outburst is ignored, except by one messenger who tells him to shut up.
- The District Commissioner agrees to help them bury Okonkwo and sets his men to the task.
- As the Commissioner leaves, he thinks about Okonkwo's actions and wants to include them in a new book he is writing. At first he thinks he can devote a whole chapter to Okonkwo, but quickly decides to cut it to a mere paragraph. (Interesting that Achebe wrote a whole book about Okonkwo...)

- *Things Fall Apart* ends with the revelation of the title of the District Commissioner's book: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

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# Classic Plot Analysis

## Initial Situation

**Okonkwo's a big fish in town.**

Okonkwo is widely known and respected as a wealthy farmer, a man of titles with three wives, and a fearless warrior.

## Conflict

**Okonkwo's terrified of being feminine and commits a couple crimes. Oops!**

Okonkwo lives in fear of becoming like his father who Okonkwo sees as being effeminate and weak. Okonkwo even joins in the group murder of his adoptive son, Ikemefuna, out of fear of seeming weak and cowardly. His behavior causes him huge internal guilt and also alienates him from his son, Nwoye.

Even though Okonkwo doesn't get into any kind of trouble for helping to murder Ikemefuna (since he wasn't a member of the clan), he's in hot water when he accidentally kills a boy during a funeral. Since killing a clansman means exile for seven years, Okonkwo has to leave town along with Mrs. Okonkwo, Mrs. Okonkwo, Mrs. Okonkwo, and the kids.

## Complication

**White men show up in town, pushing Christianity and the Queen of England on the Igbo.**

As if Okonkwo doesn't have enough on his plate, the white Christian missionaries show up, start converting villagers, and force the English system of government on the Igbo people. Essentially the white men are destroying the clan's unity. Even Okonkwo's oldest son joins the Christians. Now Okonkwo is faced with enemies of a different kind - not simply fear of

himself or his sons becoming womanly, but the potential that his whole tribe will be impotent and not fight the white men.

## **Climax**

**Okonkwo gets fed up and kills one of the white government officials.**

Okonkwo exercises his long-repressed desire to physically lash out at the missionaries. In an expression of his masculinity, he hacks off a court messenger's head. When none of the other villagers back him up, Okonkwo realizes that his clansmen will never go to war against the white men.

## **Suspense**

**The white District Commissioner comes to make Okonkwo pay for his crime.**

Okonkwo has clearly committed a serious crime. The District Commissioner heads to Okonkwo's house to retaliate. It's unclear what Okonkwo will do.

## **Denouement**

**Okonkwo commits suicide by hanging himself.**

The District Commissioner shows up only to find that Okonkwo has killed himself. Obierika accuses the District Commissioner of forcing a great man to kill and dishonor himself, but he does get the District Commissioner to agree to bury Okonkwo.

## **Conclusion**

**The white men win.**

The District Commissioner walks away from Okonkwo's body and thinks of the suicide as strange and intriguing material for the book he's writing, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. In the end, the District Commissioner might write a paragraph on Okonkwo.

## **Booker's Seven Basic Plots Analysis: Tragedy**

### **Anticipation Stage**

**Okonkwo sets out to make his own reputation and fortune.**

Okonkwo feels a deep insecurity about being like his father - weak and effeminate. Having been left with no inheritance save massive debts, Okonkwo is determined to "make himself" by pulling himself up by his own proverbial bootstraps. Okonkwo plays by all the rules of the tribe. He toils and labors arduously and exploits his talent in wrestling to present himself to society in the best light he can possibly manage.

### **Dream Stage**

**Okonkwo becomes one of the top dogs in Umuofia.**

Okonkwo establishes himself as a force to be reckoned with. He builds a large compound and productive farm. He marries three wives and has eight children in Umuofia. When young man named Ikemefuna comes to live in Okonkwo's household, his one shame - his effeminate son, Nwoye - begins to reform himself by adhering to accepted masculine behaviors. Okonkwo started his life out poor and disadvantaged, but his hard work has paid off. It seems that things can only get better for Okonkwo.

### **Frustration Stage**

**Okonkwo's luck is running out. Big time.**

Just as life is looking sunny for Okonkwo, the clan oracle orders that Ikemefuna must be killed. Since Okonkwo has grown quite fond of Ikemefuna and has fathered him for three years, this presents quite the ethical dilemma. Though Okonkwo doesn't have to participate in the murder of Ikemefuna, he joins in the action because he doesn't want people to think he's too wussy to kill his adopted son. Just as Okonkwo's getting over his

guilt for murdering Ikemefuna, his favorite daughter falls sick and later is taken hostage by crazed/possessed priestess. In short, Okonkwo has a lot of problems with his children at this point. To top it off, he ends up killing the son of a dead man at said dead man's funeral! For that, he gets to serve seven years of exile in his motherland.

## **Nightmare Stage**

**Okonkwo sees his clan falling apart but can do nothing to prevent it.**

Okonkwo has brought shame to his family. Forced to live in his motherland, Okonkwo has lost his prime years in Umuofia in which he hoped to gain the highest title in the land. As if this wasn't bad enough, white missionaries begin arriving. Gradually more and more villagers begin converting to Christianity and joining the ranks of the outsiders. Okonkwo even loses his own son, Nwoye, to the faith. The unity of his tribe is shattering before his eyes and the worst part is his people's passivity. They do nothing to oppose the Christians. Despite his urgings, they ultimately decide not to go to war with the white men.

## **Destruction or Death Stage**

**Okonkwo has a death wish...And he acts on it.**

After killing a white government official and failing to spur his people to war, Okonkwo knows that his clan will soon be completely destroyed. He also knows that the white men will inevitably demand his death or at least incarceration. Instead of bowing in submission, Okonkwo decides to take his own life. He hangs himself.

## **Three Act Plot Analysis**

### **Act I**

Okonkwo is a respected man among the Igbo people, but he lives in constant fear of becoming like his lazy, cowardly, shameful father. Out of fear of being like his dad, Okonkwo commits his first big sin by killing his adopted son, Ikemefuna. This alienates him from his eldest son Nwoye, to whom Ikemefuna was like a brother. Okonkwo commits his second big sin by accidentally killing a clansman. This crime requires that he exonerate himself by spending seven years in exile in his motherland.

### **Act II**

In his motherland, a village called Mbanta, Okonkwo's feels despair and spends his time plotting his triumphant return to Umuofia. While in exile, Okonkwo also hears news of white men arriving in Igbo territory. The rumors become reality when missionaries show up in Mbanta and start causing trouble by converting villagers. Even Okonkwo's oldest son becomes a Christian, and in rage over the betrayal, Okonkwo disowns his son.

### **Act III**

After completing his seven-year exile, Okonkwo returns to Umuofia, but his reception is not as grand as he had hoped. This is because the missionaries have arrived and have changed the Igbo lifestyle, turning brothers against brothers, and enforcing a corrupt government and system of justice. Grieved and angered by the changes he sees the white men making, Okonkwo encourages the leaders of Umuofia to take aggressive action against the missionaries. Okonkwo and other community leaders burn the church down, but are later jailed and humiliated by the white men. Okonkwo, now eager for full-out war, murders one of the white government officials. When he realizes that the Umuofia will never rebel against their oppressors, Okonkwo commits suicide.

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## **Character Analysis: Okonkwo**

### **Aka (also known as):**

Okonkwo

### **Character Analysis**

Okonkwo is a self-made, well-respected member of the Umuofia clan. Though outwardly stern and powerful, much of his life is dictated by internal fear. His greatest, overwhelming worry is that he will become like his father - lazy, unable to support his family, and cowardly. Okonkwo considers many of his father's characteristics to be feminine. Much of Okonkwo's behavior results from a reactionary desire to be completely unlike his father. This means that Okonkwo attempts to work hard, provide for his family materially, be brave, and be masculine in every possible way. As a result, Okonkwo becomes successful in many ways - he becomes very wealthy, holds a high-ranked position in the community, has three wives, and is known for his skill as a wrestler and warrior. But he also tends toward emotions that are extreme, and his fear motivates him to take actions which are often unnecessary and ultimately destructive. His fear of being feminine leads him to assist in the murder of Ikemefuna whom he loved, to beat his wives, be emotionally distant from his children, and to disown his oldest son.

As an uncompromising man's man, Okonkwo's relationship towards his family is one of complete dictatorship. His three wives are there to serve him his food and raise his children. By seeing them as his subjects, Okonkwo can justify his brutal behavior against them. He can beat his wives without guilt. He can threaten Ekwefi with a gun when she talks back. He can rebuke Nwoye for listening to old wives' tales. This sense of ownership is exemplified when Okonkwo takes Ikemefuna's life. Though he does have qualms about killing Ikemefuna, they are not qualms about whether or not he has the right to do it. Okonkwo feels complete ownership over his family.

There is, however, the problem of love and intimacy. Okonkwo rarely shows these aspects of himself since he considers emotion soft and feminine - but the emotions are there nonetheless. The fact that he lies to Ikemefuna to protect the boy from fear and later feels guilty about killing him are proof of that Okonkwo isn't devoid of positive human emotions. But, whenever there is a clash between showing true emotion and maintaining the show of his strength, Okonkwo will always go with the latter.

This doesn't mean that Okonkwo never admits he is wrong; more than anything, Okonkwo tries to follow the laws of the clan. Whenever he breaks them - either deliberately through a loss of temper or inadvertently as in shooting the boy - he never questions the punishments brought upon him. Okonkwo abides by his punishment whether or not he thinks they are fair. This is one way of maintaining his honor and reputation. He reads the laws literally, unlike his father who bent the rules and tried to circumvent certain aspects of the law.

Thus we come to one of the central conflicts in the novel: the divide between Okonkwo's personal pride and the actions forced on him by the external social laws of the Umuofia. His final act of suicide is the ultimate demonstration of things falling apart because it is the first and only time that Okonkwo purposefully and calculatedly breaks the clan laws. As a character, Okonkwo remains pretty consistent throughout the book. We see no sudden changes in behavior or mindset; in fact, that may be Okonkwo's problem - his inability to adapt or compromise his ethics to changing situations that call for more tolerance or compassion. Okonkwo, whose sense of pride and dignity continues until the end, chooses to live and die on his own terms rather than submit to the white man. For Okonkwo, giving in would be against so much of what he has stood for - courage, tradition, and manliness.

### **Character Timeline**

- Okonkwo grows up resenting his father's laziness and devotes all his time to proving his own respectability and masculinity - qualities his



father lacks.

- At age 18, Okonkwo beats a champion wrestler named the Cat.
- Okonkwo goes to Nwakibie to borrow seed yams and start his own farm. The year is a series of natural disasters but Okonkwo survives and vows that he will survive anything.
- Okonkwo is given charge of Ikemefuna for three years.
- During the Week of Peace, Okonkwo commits the crime of beating his wife. This is his first crime against the earth. As punishment, he is told to make a ritual sacrifice, which he does.
- A few days before the new year, Okonkwo threatens his second wife Ekwefi with a gun.
- The clan leaders inform Okonkwo that they are going to kill Ikemefuna, his adopted son. Though it is not required, Okonkwo participates in the murder. Guilt haunts him.
- When his daughter Ezinma falls sick, Okonkwo frantically makes medicine and does everything in his power to save his favorite child.
- Okonkwo participates as a masked *egwugwu* in a series of court-like trials as a judge.
- Okonkwo follows Chielo the priestess and Ekwefi when the priestess unexpectedly abducts Ezinma. This is the second time we see Okonkwo openly showing compassion and genuine concern for Ezinma.
- At Ezedu's funeral, Okonkwo accidentally shoots and kills a boy. For his crime, he is sentenced to seven years exile. This is his second crime against the earth.
- In Mbanta, Okonkwo is chastised by Uchendu for dishonoring his motherland by acting so depressed about his exile.
- From Obierika, Okonkwo gets news about the coming of the white men and later hears about Nwoye being among the Christian converts in Umuofia.
- We flashback to the point when Okonkwo first learned about Nwoye converting to Christianity.
- Okonkwo hears through the grapevine that Nwoye has been spending time with the Christians.
- Okonkwo attacks his son and demands to know where he's been (the answer is with the Christians). Though Uchendu prevents Okonkwo from further harming Nwoye, Okonkwo disowns his son.

- Okonkwo hosts a feast in Mbanta in gratitude to Uchendu and his family.
- Upon his return to Umuofia, Okonkwo has a conversation with Obierika about the Christians and Okonkwo despairs over the disunity of the clan.
- At this point, Okonkwo becomes more passive than he has ever been before, watching and lamenting the coming of the missionaries while unable to do anything.
- In reaction to Enoch's crime of unmasking an *egwugwu*, Okonkwo and the other leaders of Umuofia retaliate by destroying the missionaries' church. Okonkwo had advised violent action, even to the point of killing the missionaries, though the group only ended up burning down the church.
- When invited by the District Commissioner to discuss the recent destruction of the church, Okonkwo and five other leaders go to meet the official and are ambushed.
- In prison, Okonkwo is singled out to be beaten. Upon his release, he vows revenge, even if he is not supported by the clan.
- During a village conference contemplating war, Okonkwo kills a messenger sent by the District Commissioner.
- When he sees that the Umuofia don't support him, he knows it means they will not go to war. This realization drives him to suicide - his third and final offense against the earth.

## **Character Analysis: Unoka**

### **Aka (also known as):**

Unoka

### **Character Analysis**

Unoka is Okonkwo's father. Though he is a talented musician, he is lazy and irresponsible, falling into debt and bringing shame upon his family. Unoka's bad reputation in Umuofia haunts Okonkwo throughout the novel.

However, Unoka did not intentionally set out to defame his family, he just seemed to find no pleasure in anything but leisure, parties, and music.

Passion for music occupies Unoka's world more than anything and he finds his greatest joy playing his flute at festivals. What Unoka can't seem to bring himself to do is work - despite his family nearly starving and his massive list of unpaid debts. His inability to even give his worthy son any sort of inheritance only increases his shame in the eyes of the community and his son. Unoka's fear of blood and warfare combined his laziness mark him as dangerously effeminate in Okonkwo's eyes.

### **Character Timeline**

- As a young man, Unoka plays the flute for festivals and enjoys the audience, feasts, and good company. As an older man, he does nothing but laze around and rack up debts.
- When his neighbor comes to request that Unoka pay back the money he borrowed years ago, Unoka laughs in his neighbor's face. Unoka shows the man the magnitude of his debt (which is staggering), and sends him away empty-handed.
- When he asks the oracle of Agbala why he has such bad fortune with farming, the priestess answers that his bad luck doesn't stem from offending the gods or his ancestors -he has nobody to blame but himself and his laziness for his bad harvests.

- Unoka is supported by Okonkwo's productivity. He lives off his son's hard work and charity, much to Okonkwo's resentment.
- Unoka becomes ill with a disease that cause him to swell, and is left to die in the Evil Forest. He leaves Okonkwo no inheritance.
- The shame and debt which Unoka brought upon his family haunts Okonkwo for the rest of his life.

## **Character Analysis: Obierika**

### **Aka (also known as):**

Obierika

### **Character Analysis**

Obierika is Okonkwo's best friend and also a respected man in Umuofia. He often offers reasonable counterpoints to Okonkwo's desire for rash action, although Okonkwo rarely takes his friend's advice. More than any other character, Okonkwo is a thinking man, one who works things out in his head. He is one of the few characters who is truly concerned with moral ambiguities and he encourages Okonkwo to view the world in a more balanced and less hasty manner.

Obierika uses his intellect and reason to come to decisions. However, his rationality is not cold and calculating, nor is it used to further selfish means. Obierika mediates his intellect with compassion. All his efforts are dedicated to being a good friend, father, husband, and responsible community member. He is one of the few characters to view the white men with a slightly sympathetic and curious eye.

As a character, Obierika's tends to fill the role of advice-giver to Okonkwo. He forces his friend to think about the deeper matters at stake - like morality and universal truths. He tries to bring reason and compassion into Okonkwo's decision-making process, but Okonkwo rarely listens. He is too blinded and bound by his all-encompassing fear of becoming his father to hear Obierika's wise words.

### **Character Timeline**

- Obierika has a conversation with Okonkwo right after the murder of Ikemefuna. Obierika says that he wanted nothing to do with

Ikemefuna's death and Okonkwo shouldn't have involved himself either.

- That same day, Obierika negotiates the bride-price for his daughter. Later, he attends her marriage ceremony.
- When Okonkwo is exiled, Obierika wonders why a man must be punished so harshly for a crime committed unintentionally.
- In the second year of Okonkwo's exile, Obierika comes to visit his friend and brings him all the money earned from his yams. Obierika also tells Okonkwo about the coming of the white missionaries to Igbo territory.
- Obierika comes to visit Okonkwo again in Mbanta bringing the news that Nwoye has joined the missionaries in Umuofia.
- At the end of the novel, Obierika takes the District Commissioner to see Okonkwo's hanging corpse.
- In a rare moment of discomfiture, Obierika loses his composure and accuses the District Commissioner of forcing Okonkwo - one of the greatest men he has known - to death and shame.

## **Character Analysis: Nwoye**

### **Aka (also known as):**

Nwoye

### **Character Analysis**

Nwoye is Okonkwo's eldest son who Okonkwo considers irredeemably effeminate and very much like his father, Unoka. As a child, Nwoye is the frequent object of his father's criticism and remains emotionally unfulfilled. Eventually, Ikemefuna comes to fill that void and Nwoye, in his adoration of his adoptive brother, begins to emulate him. In a strange way, Ikemefuna fills the role of both father and brother for Nwoye, providing him with a peer to share his thoughts and a role model.

More than any other character, Nwoye encapsulates an innocent child who is very sensitive to his surroundings and is baffled by the seemingly arbitrary cruelties being committed around him. His dominant characteristic is his incredible ability to feel and sympathize, even more so than some of the female characters. Though considered positive traits by modern women looking for a "sensitive man," Okonkwo isn't impressed and aggressively tries to keep his son from acting like "a woman."

After Ikemefuna's unjust murder, Nwoye grows increasingly alienated from his father and seems to lose respect for him. Without Ikemefuna's companionship and influence, and with a loss of faith in his father, Nwoye reverts to his former gentle nature, instead of adhering to the false masculine one he pretended to have in Ikemefuna's presence. Increasingly, Okonkwo comes to view Nwoye as a disappointment and extremely effeminate. Neither father nor son is unable to see and understand the other on his own terms.

Ultimately, Nwoye is unable to forgive Okonkwo for his betrayal in killing his adopted brother. Nwoye's betrayal of his father by converting to

Christianity can be read as an attempt to get back at his father for his crime. Christianity, too, has its appeal for Nwoye. The missionaries' hymn about brothers living in "darkness and fear, ignorant of the love of God" touches Nwoye deeply. This missionaries' message seems to speak of another way to live that Nwoye never knew about - a way of life in which fathers don't kill their adoptive sons and twins are not abandoned to die in the Evil Forest.

### **Character Timeline**

- Nwoye likes to listen to folktales told by his mother. He secretly prefers them to the bloody war stories told by Okonkwo.
- When Ikemefuna comes to live with the family, Nwoye becomes intimate friends with him and thinks of him an older brother. As a result of their friendship, Nwoye begins taking on masculine tasks he normally would not perform in an attempt to emulate Ikemefuna. Okonkwo approves of this change in Nwoye.
- When Okonkwo returns from the group murder of Ikemefuna, Nwoye immediately knows what happened. Nwoye feels a snapping inside him that he has only felt once before. We learn that Nwoye felt the same kind of grief when he heard abandoned twins crying in the Evil Forest.
- Much later in Mbanta, Nwoye is hypnotized by the sound and story of the missionaries' song. He is compelled to convert to Christianity against the expressed wishes of his father.
- After his conversion, Nwoye prepares to go to missionary school in Umu. As he probably predicted would happen, he is disowned by his enraged father.



## **Character Analysis: Ikemefuna**

### **Aka (also known as):**

Ikemefuna

### **Character Analysis**

Ikemefuna is a fifteen-year-old boy from a neighboring clan, Mbaino, who is given up to Umuofia as a sacrifice for killing one of the women of Umuofia. He lives with Okonkwo's family for three years before the elders order him to be killed. In those three years, he grows very close to Okonkwo's family, especially Nwoye. Okonkwo even prefers him to his true son Nwoye, considering Ikemefuna to be a promising, hard-working young man. His murder, in which Okonkwo takes a part, haunts Okonkwo throughout the book.

From the very beginning, Ikemefuna is the ultimate victim; his fate is completely out of his control since he is taken away by his family so early in life for a crime which he had no part in, nor any knowledge of. In his new life, Ikemefuna is subject to the whims of his new father and the Umuofia elders, in whose hands his fate ultimately lies.

Ikemefuna is a prime example of how Okonkwo's fear of being like his father - feminine and cowardly - drives him to make a poor, regrettable decision. He joins in killing Ikemefuna because he is afraid of being weak, yet he is haunted by his decision and it also permanently emotionally distances him from Nwoye.

### **Character Timeline**

- After a woman of the Umuofia tribe is killed at Mbaino village's market, the Mbaino tribe offers Ikemefuna to Umuofia as recompense for their crime. Ikemefuna comes to Umuofia during the Week of Peace.

- Ikemefuna is put under Okonkwo's care indefinitely (until the elders of Umuofia decide what to do with him) and lives with Okonkwo's family for three years.
- Ikemefuna is initially intimidated by Okonkwo's family, but as the years pass, he grows into a lively, well-liked boy.
- Ikemefuna becomes great friends with Nwoye and exerts a masculine influence over the younger boy.
- When the decree comes that Ikemefuna must die, Okonkwo lies to Ikemefuna and tells him he is going home.
- Ikemefuna does not initially believe his adoptive father, but on the trip he eventually comes to believe that he might actually see his mother again. He sings a song from his childhood.
- The men of Umuofia ambush Ikemefuna. When Ikemefuna begs Okonkwo to help, calling him "father," Okonkwo slashes the boy with his machete.

## **Character Analysis: Ekwefi**

### **Aka (also known as):**

Ekwefi, Okonkwo's second wife

### **Character Analysis**

Ekwefi is Okonkwo's second wife. Once a village beauty, she ran away from her home and husband to marry Okonkwo. She was smitten with Okonkwo when he beat the notorious Cat in a legendary wrestling match. Though it's kind of romantic the Ekwefi ran away and eloped with Okonkwo, it turns out he's not Prince Charming. Ekwefi, like Okonkwo's other two wives, suffers quite a bit under his forceful and aggressive rule of the household. At one point, just because he was in a bad mood, Okonkwo beat Ekwefi badly and even threatened to kill her with his gun. Regardless, Ekwefi is the most spirited of Okonkwo's wives and frequently stands up to him and talks back.

Ekwefi's life has been full of sadness. She has bad luck with bearing children; despite giving birth to ten children, only one has survived. Thus, she nurtures a deep bond with her single daughter, Ezinma. Achebe paints Ekwefi as an extremely devoted mother. Her pain and bitterness in losing nine other children leads her to treasure her one daughter even above life itself. She dotes over and spoils her child, allowing her treats forbidden to other children and building a deep relationship of trust.

Ekwefi's history of loss and bitterness renders her a strong woman, capable of withstanding much pain and disappointment. This also leads to a sense of boldness in her, a rather unfeminine characteristic that sometimes annoys Okonkwo. She has the audacity to knock on his door at night and to talk back to him when he accuses her of killing a banana tree. But she also takes her punishment with gritted teeth and without complaint. This kind of strength and boldness has something masculine about it, which emerges even more strongly in her daughter, Ezinma. Though not explicitly stated,

we think Ekwefi might be Okonkwo's favorite wife, just like Ezinma is his favorite daughter.

### **Character Timeline**

- During Peace Week, Okonkwo commits a crime against the earth by beating Ekwefi for coming home too late to make his dinner on time.
- While preparing for the New Year Yam Festival, Okonkwo accuses Ekwefi of killing a banana tree. When she speaks up for herself to point out the tree isn't dead, Okonkwo goes into a rage, beating her and threatening to shoot her dead.
- Ekwefi excitedly awaits the wrestling matches which are a part of the new year celebration. The narrator lets us know that, smitten by Okonkwo's wrestling prowess many years ago, Ekwefi was compelled to run away from home to elope with Okonkwo.
- Ekwefi wakes Okonkwo up by pounding on his door in the morning. She tells him that Ezinma is deathly ill. Ekwefi cares for Ezinma as Okonkwo gathers medicinal herbs.
- As she tends her sick daughter, the narrator tells us that Ekwefi has bad luck with pregnancies. Although she has borne ten children, only one of them - Ezinma - has survived, Ezinma. She bears what the Igbo people call *ogbanje* or changeling children.
- Ekwefi is close friends with Chielo, the priestess of Agbala. Yet, when Chielo is possessed and takes away Ezinma, Ekwefi follows them, determined to make sure that Ezinma remains unhurt or die trying.
- Ekwefi often spends nights exchanging folk stories with her daughter.
- When Okonkwo is about to leave Mbanta, Ekwefi is put in charge of preparing cassava for the final feast.

## Character Analysis: Ezinma

### Aka (also known as):

Ezinma

### Character Analysis

Ezinma is Okonkwo's eldest daughter and Ekwefi's only child. The girl has a very close relationship with her mother, and she is her father's favorite child. Okonkwo - being a man who basically only values masculine qualities - strongly wishes that Ezinma had been born a boy, which, from his frame of mind, shows how much he loves and values her.

Because she is her mother's only child, Ezinma is coddled and often acts in a bolder manner than the other children. She grows up more privileged and adored than many of her peers. Her deep love for her mother is based on little conspiracies like eating (forbidden) eggs together secretly in Ekwefi's locked bedroom and a shared sense of respect that goes beyond that of the traditional mother-daughter relationship. Ezinma calls her mother by her given name, and she has the audacity to ask Ekwefi questions that other mothers would find annoying.

Like Ekwefi, Ezinma has an inborn confidence that outshines that of most girls. The narrator suggests that she sits like a man, asks to take on the tasks of a boy, talks with brazenness unknown to her sex, and even has temper tantrums like her father. However, Okonkwo seems to enjoy her transgressions of prescribed gender boundaries, despite his outwardly staunch adherence to traditional gender roles.

However, Ezinma - as atypical as she is with her *ogbanje* birth and brazen character - ends up living the life of a typical Umuofia woman. She grows up into a beauty like her mother, comes back to Umuofia after living in exile with her father, and gets married there. Ironically it's Nwoye, the timid boy, who steps out and openly chooses a nontraditional life path, not

Ezinma who seems to grow similar to her traditional father.

### Character Timeline

- Ezinma has a close relationship to her mother and has a tendency to ask many questions. The curious little girl poses her mother with many questions as they cook and wait for the new year wrestling matches to begin.
- Ezinma brings her father his meal. She asks if she can carry his chair to the wrestling match, but he won't let her because that is a boy's job.
- Two days after Okonkwo helped kill Ikemefuna, Ezinma brings him food and insists that he eat it, since he hasn't eaten for two full days.
- Ezinma falls sick from a fever. She's given a steam treatment with boiled herbs that her father has prepared.
- The narrator tells about how Ezinma has always been a sickly child. The town considers her to be an *ogbanje* child - one who goes through many cycles of being born, dying, and reentering her mother's womb. In order to break her connection to the *ogbanje* world, Ezinma is forced to locate her *iyi-uwa* (a kind of magic stone).
- While telling stories with her mother one night, Chielo the priestess shows up and takes Ezinma on a long journey to the shrine of Agbala. We never learn what happens to her in the shrine, but she emerges alive and whole.
- During Okonkwo's exile, Ezinma grows into a beautiful girl and upon her return to Umuofia, is quickly proposed to. The narrator implies that she settles down into a good marriage.

## **Character Roles**

### **Protagonist**

#### **Okonkwo**

We're going to go with Okonkwo. First of all, you just can't ignore the fact that the whole novel centers around his story - his rise to wealth and a position of respect, his fall into exile, his inability to prevent white men from destroying his culture, and his suicide.

So it's true that Okonkwo isn't necessarily an awesome role model - he's extremely aggressive, is motivated by fear, and emotionally distances himself from just about everyone he cares about. He's not really a bad guy, though. Okonkwo has lots of admirable characteristics: he's a hard worker, supports his family, takes responsibility for his own negative behaviors, and even secretly cares deeply for his family.

The problem with Okonkwo is he's kind of a tragic hero, and tragic heroes come with tragic flaws - Okonkwo's flaw is a strong fear of being weak and effeminate like his father. Because we can see where Okonkwo's flaw comes from (i.e., a deadbeat dad), we can have sympathy for Okonkwo and really feel compassion for the guy when things in his life go downhill. As a reader, you also know you care for the guy at the very end of the book when the District Commissioner decides that Okonkwo is only worth one measly paragraph in a book. If you're anything like us, you started feeling all defensive of Okonkwo, knowing that he deserves a full book to explain his story and complexity. Ah hah! There you go, that proves Okonkwo's the protagonist.

### **Antagonist**

#### **Unoka**

Though not an explicit enemy of Okonkwo in the traditional sense, Unoka does indeed antagonize his son. The memory of Unoka's debt and shame haunts Okonkwo throughout the novel. Unoka's actions basically set the template for everything Okonkwo will oppose - frivolity (in Unoka's love of music), laziness, dislike of blood and violence, dependence on charity. It's largely Unoka's actions that shape Okonkwo into the man he becomes. Thus, it would be interesting to imagine what type of man Okonkwo would have become if Unoka had been a respectable member of society.

## **Antagonist**

### **The Missionaries and White Government Officials**

The missionaries and the white government that they bring act as a general enemy for the whole of the Igbo people. They invade the Igbo people's land and treacherously destroy Umuofia from the inside out. They use the Igbo people's superstitions against them, claiming the superiority of their own god when the expected wrath of the native gods does not come to fruition. In this manner, they persuade and slowly win more and more converts to their side. They divide and conquer, compromising the Umuofia's sense of unity, rendering the clan unable to set up any uniform kind of resistance.

For Okonkwo personally, the worst aspect of the missionaries is his perception of the effeminate characteristics they impose on the people of Umuofia. Because the Umuofia can no longer act as a single unit to oppose the white man, he considers his people indecisive, passive, and weak rather than the proud warriors they once were. Not only does Okonkwo despise the white men for bringing weakness to the clan, he is also specifically enraged by the government they impose on the Umuofia. Okonkwo in particular suffered a humiliating and unjust beating by the white court, and offense which he cannot forgive.

## **Foil**

### **Obierika to Okonkwo**



Although they are close friends, Obierika and Okonkwo approach the world very differently. Obierika isn't a coward, but he isn't overly aggressive or bloodthirsty either. Okonkwo, on the other hand, always seems eager to get into a fight. Obierika isn't passive, but acts only after careful thought and deliberation. He is generally more rational and less rash than Okonkwo. Although he gives Okonkwo lots of good advice and often serves as a voice of reason, Okonkwo tends to ignore his friend's suggestions.

## **Muse**

### **Ezinma**

Ezinma seems to fit the bill here. She's the apple of Okonkwo's eye. Though she doesn't inspire him to create any music or works of art, she does bring out his compassion, leading him to express his care and concern in ways that he doesn't do for anyone else. When she falls sick with fever, he immediately gives up his sleep to forage in the woods for healing herbs. He boils the medicine himself and administers it to her, thus saving her life. We wonder if he would do the same for...oh say...Nwoye. Probably not. Another telling scene comes when Chielo abducts Ezinma. Okonkwo agonizes over whether to stay home and show his strength and obedience to the gods or give into his concern and follow after his daughter. In the end, he does the latter. This is one of the few times when Okonkwo chooses to show a 'feminine' sort of compassion rather than adhere to his stoic masculine image.

## **Character Clues**

### **Social Status or Societal Position**

In Igbo culture, a man's social status is based on merit rather than inheritance. A man can gain respect by his bravery in war, his athletic skill as a wrestler, and the productivity of his yam fields (which is directly tied to hard work). Thus, if a man has a "title" - or two or three titles - then he has earned an increased societal position. The narrator keeps the reader up to speed on which male characters in the book have titles. Okonkwo has two titles, so that proves he is both extremely hard working and physically capable. Okonkwo's father, on the other hand, never earned any titles - this shows that he was both lazy and generally incompetent.

### **Masculine and Feminine**

Through Okonkwo's eyes everyone he encounters is characterized as either masculine or feminine. When Okonkwo sees a character as masculine, we know that character probably has a fiery personality and is likely aggressive. "Feminine" characters are emotional, compassionate, peace-loving, and often lazy. Characterization as masculine or feminine doesn't fall predictably along gender lines. For example, Okonkwo considers Ezinma to be masculine because she has an outspoken, fiery nature. However, Okonkwo sees his son Nwoye as feminine because the young man is sensitive and compassionate. Characters aren't also necessarily only masculine or only feminine. A good example is Obierika, who doesn't shy away from duty and warfare, but has a strong sense of compassion. Generally, the characters with a balanced dose of masculine and feminine characteristics are the most successful and happy with themselves.

### **Family Life**

How characters treat their family members reveals much about their character. For example, Okonkwo often takes his irrational anger out on his wives, beating them. That's just not cool. He's also perpetually criticizing

his son, Nwoye. On the other hand, Okonkwo supported his own mother and sisters when he was a young man, although it wasn't even his duty. Okonkwo's relations in Mbanta, and specifically Uchendu, are painted in a positive light because they welcome Okonkwo with open arms when he is exiled from Umuofia. Uchendu and his sons go so far as to help Okonkwo build a new compound and donate yams to him simply because he is a member of their family.

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## **Theme and Quote Analysis on: Gender**

### **Theme Summary**

Much of the traditional Igbo life presented in this novel revolves around structured gender roles. Essentially all of Igbo life is gendered, from the crops that men and women grow, to characterization of crimes. In Igbo culture, women are the weaker sex, but are also endowed with qualities that make them worthy of worship, like the ability to bear children. The dominant role for women is: first, to make a pure bride for an honorable man, second, to be a submissive wife, and third, to bear many children. The ideal man provides for his family materially and has prowess on the battlefield. The protagonist in the novel is extremely concerned with being hyper-masculine and devalues everything feminine, leaving him rather unbalanced. Much of the gender theme in the book centers around the idea of balance between masculine and feminine forces – body and mind/soul, emotionality and rationality, mother and father. If one is in imbalance, it makes the whole system haywire.

### **Study Questions**

1. What characteristics are considered distinctly masculine and distinctly feminine? Do such stereotypes hold true in the actions of the actual characters?
2. Which characters cross gender stereotypes? What are their occupations or roles in society? How does society react (if at all) to the break from normal gender roles?
3. What is the purpose of gender-coding almost every aspect of society – right down to the crops?
4. How might Okonkwo's "sins" be seen as the results of an imbalance between nurturing feminine and aggressive masculine forces?

## Sample Thesis Statements

Although Okonkwo spends most of his time expressing his masculinity, he often ignores or violates feminine tenets like peace and valuing one's family. Shunning of all things feminine causes him to commit ever-escalating crimes that lead to his downfall.

## Quotes & Thoughts on Gender

### QUOTE:

The elders, or *ndichie*, met to hear a report of Okonkwo's mission. At the end they decided, as everybody knew they would, that the girl should go to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered wife. As for the boy, he belonged to the clan as a whole, and there was no hurry to decide his fate. (2.11)

### THOUGHT:

While the young boy's fate remains undecided, the virgin girl's fate is quickly sealed. For someone else's crime, she must give up the life she has known, her maidenhood, and her hand in marriage to a complete stranger. This new girl seems to be considered a complete replacement for Ogbuefi Udo's former wife, implying that women are essentially all the same and therefore interchangeable. Basically, women are passed around like un-unique objects in the Igbo world.

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### QUOTE:

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper [...] (2.12)

THOUGHT:

In the Igbo world, men are the dominant sex and they “rule” over their families, including their wives. Women are relegated to a more or less servile position, often living in fear of their husbands. Though Okonkwo’s quick temper with his family is never portrayed as admirable, he unquestionably has the right to be aggressive at home.

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QUOTE:

Even as a little boy he had resented his father’s failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was *agbala*. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken to title. (2.12)

THOUGHT:

In Igbo culture, women are considered weaker than the men and thus it’s an insult to men to be called an *agbala*. Okonkwo is acutely aware of what it means to be a man in the Igbo tribe and is ashamed that someone might call him or his male relations *agbala*.

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QUOTE:

“He belongs to the clan,” he told her [Okonkwo’s eldest wife]. “So look after him.”

“Is he staying long with us?” she asked.

“Do what you are told, woman,” Okonkwo thundered, and stammered.

“When did you become one of the *ndichie* of Umuofia?”

And so Nwoye’s mother took Ikemefuna to her hut and asked no more questions. (2.16-19)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo treats his wife like a servant, demanding that she does whatever he commands her with no questions asked. Women, as demonstrated by Okonkwo’s eldest wife here, are taught to be silent and obedient. In fact, women count for so little in Igbo society that they are often not even addressed by their given names, but referred to by their relationship with men. Throughout the entire novel, the narrator rarely calls Okonkwo’s first wife by her name, she is almost always identified in relation to her husband or son, Nwoye.

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QUOTE:

His mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women’s crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man’s crop. (3.28)

THOUGHT:

Nearly every aspect of Igbo society is gendered, even crops. Yam, because it is the staple of the Igbo diet, is considered a man’s crop. This allows men to maintain the position as the primary providers for their families, and the respect which that role confers.

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QUOTE:



Only a week ago a man had contradicted him at a kindred meeting which they held to discuss the next ancestral feast. Without looking at the man Okonkwo had said. “This meeting is for men.” The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman. Okonkwo knew how to kill a man’s spirit. (4.1)

THOUGHT:

Being called a woman is clearly a nasty insult as it has the ability to “kill a man’s spirit.” Obviously, women aren’t highly valued in Umuofia.

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QUOTE:

Inwardly Okonkwo knew that the boys were still too young to understand fully the difficult art of preparing seed-yams. But he thought that one could not begin too early. Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one gravest to another was a very great man indeed. Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man. He would stamp out the disquieting signs of laziness which he thought he already saw in him. (4.32)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo associates yams with manliness. The more yams a man is able to grow, the more respected he is in his community. This shows that men are judged in part by their ability to provide for their families. Since yams are a hard crop to grow, being a good provider is directly tied to being a hard worker. Okonkwo, having suffered embarrassment and poverty from his rather effeminate father (by his standards), will stop at nothing to keep his sons from the same fate – even if it means breaking their hearts as little boys.

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QUOTE:

[Okonkwo]: “I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan. I would sooner strangle him with my own hands.” (4.33)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo would rather kill his son than live with an effeminate one. Basically, Okonkwo is thinking of his own reputation as a man, which he doesn't want tarnished by a soft son.

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QUOTE:

As a matter of fact the tree was very much alive. Okonkwo's second wife had merely cut a few leaves off it to wrap some food, and she said so. Without further argument, Okonkwo gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping. Neither of the other wives dared to interfere beyond an occasional and tentative, “It is enough, Okonkwo,” pleaded from a reasonable distance. (5.10)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo is plain old irrationally angry and takes it out on his wife, beating her even though he isn't truly angry about the banana tree. Part of what enrages Okonkwo is that his second wife, Ekwefi, stands up to him and tells him that she didn't kill the darn banana tree. Okonkwo can't handle a woman contradicting him. Okonkwo doesn't even respect Ekwefi enough to engage in a debate with her -- he just smacks her “without further argument.”

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#### QUOTE:

There was no festival in all the seasons of the year which gave her [Ekwefi] as much pleasure as the wrestling match. Many years ago when she was the village beauty Okonkwo had won her heart by throwing the Cat in the greatest contest in living memory. She did not marry him then because he was too poor to pay her bride-price. But a few years later she ran away from her husband and came to live with Okonkwo. (5.14)

#### THOUGHT:

Ekwefi is attracted to strong, capable men. Okonkwo's victory against the unbeaten Cat made him something of a celebrity in her eyes and she acted on her wishes, running away from her husband to come and live with Okonkwo. Interestingly, although Okonkwo's wrestling skill is attractive and gains him status, it doesn't mean he'll be a good husband. Can you imagine running away to elope with a man only to find out that he's easily enraged and has no qualms about beating his wives?

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#### QUOTE:

Okonkwo cleared his throat and moved his feet to the beat of the drums. It filled him with fire as it had always done from his youth. He trembled with the desire to conquer and subdue. It was like the desire for woman. (5.38)

#### THOUGHT:

Okonkwo characterizes his desire to wrestle as a desire for sex. This passage also gives us a very clear insight into how he views women: as objects to "conquer" and "subdue." Clearly, Okonkwo doesn't see women as his equals.

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QUOTE:

“Sit like a woman!” Okonkwo shouted at her. Ezinma brought her two legs together and stretched them in front of her. (5.56)

THOUGHT:

Gender is so coded into every aspect of Igbo society that Okonkwo loses his patience with Ezinma when she fails to sit like a woman. This is also a sign that Ezinma sometimes trespasses into the realm of men with her unfeminine actions.

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QUOTE:

And after a pause she said: “Can I bring your chair for you?”

“No, that is a boy’s job.” Okonkwo was specially fond of Ezinma. (5.59-60)

THOUGHT:

Although Ezinma is probably Okonkwo’s favorite child, he adheres very strictly to the norms of male and female action ascribed by Igbo culture. He does not allow Ezinma to do something as simple as carrying a chair to the festival for him because he considers it a boy’s task. Sadly, Okonkwo’s strict following of gender roles prevents him from showing his affection for his daughter.

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QUOTE:

The woman with whom she talked was called Chielo. She was the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. In ordinary life, Chielo

was a widow with two children. She was very friendly with Ekwefi and they shared a common shed in the market. She was particularly fond of Ekwefi's only daughter, Ezinma, whom she called "my daughter." Quite often she bought beancakes and gave Ekwefi some to take home to Ezinma. Anyone seeing Chielo in ordinary life would hardly believe she was the same person who prophesied when the spirit of Agbala was upon her. (6.17)

#### THOUGHT:

Chielo is an example of a powerful woman – the lone priestess of major god – who leads a dual life. In the market, she is an ordinary woman and a good friend, but when the god takes possession of her, she changes drastically and becomes a figure to be reckoned with. It is only when a woman has supernatural power behind her that she is respected by men.

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#### QUOTE:

He [Ikemefuna] was like an elder brother to Nwoye, and from the very first seemed to have kindled a new fire in the younger boy. He made him feel grown-up; and they no longer spent the evenings in mother's hut while she cooked, but now sat with Okonkwo in his *obi*, or watched him as he tapped his palm tree for the evening wine. Nothing pleased Nwoye now more than to be sent for by his mother or another of his father's wives to do one of those difficult and masculine tasks in the home, like splitting wood, or pounding food. On receiving such a message through a younger brother or sister, Nwoye would feign annoyance and grumble aloud about women and their troubles.

Okonkwo was inwardly pleased at his son's development, and he knew it was due to Ikemefuna. He wanted Nwoye to grow into a tough young man capable of ruling his father's household when he was dead and gone to join the ancestors. He wanted him to be a prosperous man, having enough in his barn to feed the ancestors with regular sacrifices. And so he was always happy when he heard him grumbling about women. That showed that in

time he would be able to control his women-folk. No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man. He was like the man in the song who had ten and one wives and not enough soup for his foo-foo. (7.1-2)

THOUGHT:

Ikemefuna's presence makes Nwoye more willing to take on masculine tasks, however pretentiously. Okonkwo takes his son's changing behavior as a sign of budding authoritative masculinity. Interestingly, Okonkwo defines men partially by their behavior towards women – males aren't real men unless they can force women to do their bidding. Thus men can have free will, but women must be controlled and ruled over.

[Go to CHAPTER 7 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

That was the kind of story that Nwoye loved. But he now knew that they were for foolish women and children, and he knew that his father wanted him to be a man. And so he feigned that he no longer cared for women's stories. And when he did this he saw that his father was pleased, and no longer rebuked him or beat him. So Nwoye and Ikemefuna would listen to Okonkwo's stories about tribal wars, or how, years ago, he had stalked his victim, overpowered him and obtained his first human head. (7.4)

THOUGHT:

Proscribed gender roles force Nwoye to hide his true self from his father. By forcing his son to act like "man's man," Okonkwo isn't teaching Nwoye to be a hard worker or a valuable community member or a good husband, he only teaches his son to use trickery to avoid a beating.

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QUOTE:

“When did you become a shivering old woman,” Okonkwo asked himself, “you, who are known in all the nine villages for your valor in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed.” (8.9)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo’s guilt over killing his adopted son haunts him. Okonkwo, who shuns all emotion, thinks that feeling compassion and guilt for the boy is a sign of weakness and femininity – two characteristics that are despicable to him. Clearly, Okonkwo sees valor and compassion as incompatible.

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QUOTE:

“He [Maduka] will do great things,” Okonkwo said. “If I had a son like him I should be happy. I am worried about Nwoye. A bowl of pounded yams can throw him in a wrestling match. His two younger brothers are more promising. But I can tell you, Obierika, that my children do not resemble me [...] If Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit.” (8.17)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo is disappointed in his sons – especially Nwoye. The reason Okonkwo specifically cites is that his son is a poor wrestler and isn’t at all like Okonkwo. Ironically, he wishes his daughter were a son because her “spirit” is “right” for a man.

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QUOTE:

Whenever the thought of his father's weakness and failure troubled him he expelled it by thinking about his own strength and success. And so he did now. His mind went to his latest show of manliness.

"I cannot understand why you refused to come with us to kill that boy," he asked Obierika. (8.20-21)

THOUGHT:

When fearful of being like his father, Okonkwo has to reassure himself strongly of his own masculinity. Strangely, Okonkwo considers joining in the murder of Ikemefuna as being a "show of masculinity." Considering that one traditional aspect of masculinity is being the protector of one's family, killing Ikemefuna might just be cruel and gruesome, rather than masculine.

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QUOTE:

"It was always said that Ndulue and Ozoemena had one mind," said Obierika. "I remember when I was a young boy there was a song about them. He could not do anything without telling her."

"I did not know that," said Okonkwo. "I thought he was a strong man in his youth."

"He was indeed," said Ofoedu.

Okonkwo shook his head doubtfully. (8.43-46)

THOUGHT:



Okonkwo considers any sign of affection and dependence between husband and wife as a reflection of the husband's weakness and womanliness. It seems like Okonkwo isn't in for a good future – or happy marriages – if he thinks that strong loving relationships must be avoided to reach his ultimate goal of complete manliness.

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#### QUOTE:

As he was speaking the boy returned, followed by Akueke, his half-sister, carrying a wooden dish with three kola nuts and alligator pepper. She gave the dish to her father's eldest brother and then shook hands, very shyly, with her suitor and his relatives. She was about sixteen and just ripe for marriage. Her suitor and his relatives surveyed her young body with expert eyes as if to assure themselves that she was beautiful and ripe.

She wore a coiffure which was done up into a crest in the middle of the head. Cam wood was rubbed lightly into her skin, and all over her body were black patterns drawn with *uli*. She wore a black necklace which hung down in three coils just above her full, succulent breasts. On her arms were red and yellow bangles, and on her waist four or five rows of *jigida*, or waist beads. (8.65-66)

#### THOUGHT:

Akueke is the perfect example of an ideal Igbo girl. She is shy and voluptuous and wears her clothes, hair, and accessories in the style of a fashionable young woman. When deciding if they want her to marry into their family, the suitor and his relatives “survey” her, so they just look at her. We might recommend that they try an extensive interview, but they seem to be satisfied that she'll be a good wife based on her shy behavior, “succulent breasts,” and her dress.

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#### QUOTE:

“It was only this morning,” said Obierika “that Okonkwo and I were talking about Abame and Aninta, where titled men climb trees and pound foo-foo for their wives.”

“All their customs are upside-down. They do not decide bride-price as we do, with sticks. They haggle and bargain as if they were buying a goat or a cow in the market.”

“That is very bad,” said Obierika’s eldest brother. “But what is good in one place is bad in another place. In Umunso they do not bargain at all, not even with broomsticks. The suitor just goes on bringing bags of cowries until his in-laws tell him to stop. It is a bad custom because it always leads to a quarrel.”

“The world is large,” said Okonkwo. “I have even heard that in some tribes a man’s children belong to his wife and her family.”

“That cannot be,” said Machi. “You might as well say that the woman lies on top of the man when they are making the children.” (8.84-88)

#### THOUGHT:

The Umuofia are dead set in their definitions of what is masculine and what is feminine. Machi can’t even abide by the idea that in some cultures, women own their children. He compares that aberration of appropriate social structure to the impossibility of women being on top during sex – which you only have to check out *Cosmopolitan* once to know that isn’t really an impossibility. Anyway, the men seem to feel that their own masculinity is threatened by other tribes flouting different customs. Okonkwo and many of the other Umuofia men, then seem to derive their feelings of masculine self-worth from outside sources – like cultural practices – rather than from an internal feeling of positive self-image.

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QUOTE:

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. He titled men and elders sat on their stools waiting for the trials to begin. (10.2)

THOUGHT:

Women are largely excluded from participating in the traditional “judicial” hearings, as can be seen by their position in the audience – on the outskirts. Only men may speak and judge at these trials, even when a woman is the one with a complaint to pose.

[Go to CHAPTER 10 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Odukwe]: “The law of Umuofia is that if a woman runs away from her husband her bride-price is returned.” (10.32)

THOUGHT:

Women are treated like pieces of property, worth a set sum of money, which can be exchanged from man to man.

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QUOTE:

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female.

Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years. (13.13)

THOUGHT:

Even crimes are gendered in Igbo society, with male crimes considered more severe and pre-meditated than female ones. Thus, the punishment for female crimes is less severe than for male ones. It says something about Igbo values for women that a person's punishment is to be exiled to his motherland.

[Go to CHAPTER 13 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Uchendu]: “Can you tell me, Okonkwo, why it is that one of the commonest names we give our children is Nneka, or ‘Mother is Supreme?’ We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to its father and his family and not to its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say Nneka – ‘Mother is Supreme.’ Why is that?”

“I do not know the answer,” Okonkwo replied [...].

“Then listen to me [...]. It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme.” (14.25-32)

THOUGHT:

The mother figure offers her child something the father never could – unconditional compassion. Uchendu presents fathers as a kind of fair-weather friend. This explains why a man is exiled to his motherland when

he has committed a crime; he can expect to find sympathy and forgiveness there. And this is why “Mother is Supreme.” Finally, something nice about women!

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QUOTE:

Nneka had had four previous pregnancies and childbirths. But each time she had borne twins, and they had been immediately thrown away. Her husband and his family were already becoming highly critical of such a woman and were not unduly perturbed when they found she had fled to join the Christians. It was a good riddance. (17.13)

THOUGHT:

If a woman can't successfully bear children, she's not really worth much. Nneka's husband and his family don't even really care that Nneka has run off with the Christians, it saves them the trouble of supporting a woman who can't pull her own weight by providing children.

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QUOTE:

Now that he had time to think of it, his son's crime stood out in its stark enormity. To abandon the gods of one's father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors. Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. (17.25)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo considers the Christians effeminate because they preach and sing more than they take action. However, he sees how successful the

missionaries' recruitment has been and he fears annihilation of his bloodline. But to Okonkwo, he sees annihilation as the loss of all of his male offspring; his daughters carrying his blood isn't enough for him.

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QUOTE:

Okonkwo was popularly called the 'Roaring Flame.' As he looked into the log fire he recalled the name. He was a flaming fire. How then could he have begotten a son like Nwoye, degenerate and effeminate? Perhaps he was not his son. No! he could not be. His wife had played him false. He would teach her! But Nwoye resembled his grandfather, Unoka, who was Okonkwo's father. He pushed the thought out of his mind. He, Okonkwo, was called a flaming fire. How could he have begotten a woman for a son? (17.26)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo compares himself to a flame – a symbol of masculinity for its incessant movement, its virile heat, its flaming temper, and its destructiveness. He also equates cold dead ash with femininity. Okonkwo is extremely disappointed in Nwoye because he isn't fire-like – essentially, Okonkwo wants sons that are just like him. He's so disappointed in Nwoye that he goes so far as to think that maybe his wife slept with another man. It hurts Okonkwo's own sense of masculinity to see that his own progeny is not fire-like.

[Go to CHAPTER 17 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

"Let us not reason like cowards," said Okonkwo. "If a man comes into my hut and defecates 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.” Okonkwo made a sound full of disgust. This was a womanly clan, he thought. Such a thing could never happen in his fatherland, Umuofia. (18.22)

#### THOUGHT:

Okonkwo associates cowardice with femininity and thus calls the Mbanta tribe womanly for their refusal to violently resist the Christians. He equates action and violence with masculinity and his warlike Umuofia clan.

[Go to CHAPTER 18 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

“You have all seen the great abomination of your brother. Now he is no longer my son or your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If any one of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now while I am alive so that I can curse him.” (20.7)

#### THOUGHT:

Okonkwo considers Nwoye’s defection to the Christian side a sign of lost masculinity and also unworthiness to be considered part of Okonkwo’s family. So adamant is he that his children follow the stereotypical traditions of what is masculine and what is feminine that he disowns Nwoye for his crime, and will do the same to any of his other children that follow in Nwoye’s footsteps.

[Go to CHAPTER 20 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Okonkwo was very lucky in his daughter. He never stopped regretting that Ezinma was a girl. Of all his children she alone understood his every mood.

A bond of sympathy had grown between them as the years had passed.  
(20.8)

THOUGHT:

Again, Okonkwo regrets that Ezinma has been born a girl since he believes she has the right spirit for a man. Furthermore, she understands him, a bond which he would greatly prefer to share with another man instead of a lowly woman.

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QUOTE:

Ezinma grew up in her father's exile and became one of the most beautiful girls in Mbanta. She was called Crystal of Beauty, as her mother had been called in her youth. The young ailing girl who had caused her mother so much heartache had been transformed, almost overnight, into a healthy, buoyant maiden. She had, it was true, her moment of depression when she would snap at everybody like an angry dog. These moods descended on her suddenly and for no apparent reason. But they were very rare and short-lived. As long as they lasted, she could bear no other person but her father.  
(20.9)

THOUGHT:

Ezinma is becoming more and more stereotypically feminine. Her extraordinary beauty makes her much desired by men, but she still retains trans-gender traits like her somewhat fiery temper and her concord with her hyper-masculine father.

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QUOTE:



With two beautiful grown-up daughters his return to Umuofia would attract considerable attention. His future sons-in-law would be men of authority in the clan. The poor and unknown would not dare come forth. (20.14)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo in part values his daughters because they are beautiful and can therefore attract the most respected men, which will in turn bring Okonkwo more honor and status in the community. Though we know Okonkwo cares about Ezinma, he does still objectify all his daughters, seeing them as vehicles to further his reputation.

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QUOTE:

Okonkwo was deeply grieved [...]. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women. (21.25)

THOUGHT:

The breaking apart of the Umuofia people is a signal to Okonkwo of their developing weakness and femininity. He greatly valued his people because they epitomized masculinity, and thus he mourns his clan and considers it of less value by seeing his clan as feminine.

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QUOTE:

“Worthy men are no more,” Okonkwo sighed as he remembered those days. “Isike will never forget how we slaughtered them in that war. We killed twelve of their men and they killed only two of ours. Before the end of the fourth market week they were suing for peace. Those were days when men were men.” (24.8)

THOUGHT:

Because his Umuofia people will not fight a holy war against the Christians, Okonkwo considers them weakened to the point of womanliness. His vision of masculinity seems to have no place for anything but rash and aggressive action. Only in the old glory days when the Umuofia fearlessly fought wars and killed other tribes were they really men.

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QUOTE:

“The greatest obstacle in Umuofia,” Okonkwo thought bitterly, “is that coward, Egonwanne. His sweet tongue can change fire into cold ash. When he speaks he moves our men to impotence. If they had ignored his womanish wisdom five days ago, we would not have come to this.” (24.10)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo considers Egonwanne womanly because his words stop men from acting, renders them impotent. Egonwanne is a retarding force on the masculine Umuofia. Okonkwo’s point is driven further by invoking the fire/ash rhetoric, with fire being masculine and ash being impotent and emasculated.

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## **Theme and Quote Analysis on: Family**

### **Theme Summary**

For the Igbo, there are a few key ideas that form the basis of an ideal family: mutual respect for each other, a reverence for all past fathers, and unity. The father is not only the provider for the family, but defender of its honor and teacher of his sons. The mother's main duty is to add to the family line by bearing healthy children and also to please her husband. Children are the inheritors of the future and are raised to continue the values of the older generation. This family unit is the most fundamental unit of society and its structure can be expanded to fit a whole community or even a pantheon of gods.

### **Study Questions**

1. What role do women play in the family? What sorts of responsibilities do they have? In return, what kind of power or respect do they command?
2. How are children represented as innocent and closely connected to the earth? Consider Ikemefuna and Nwoye in particular.
3. What is the relationship between mother and child and how does this play into the idea of Nneka – 'Mother is Supreme'?
4. How might one view the clan as an extension of an individual's family?
5. Does Okonkwo's family fit the model of an ideal family? In which ways does his family meet the ideal, in which ways does it deviate?

### **Sample Thesis Statements**

Although wives must always act subservient to their husbands, the mother proves to be the most venerated role in Igbo society, even over that of the father.

### **Quotes & Thoughts on Family**

#### QUOTE:

“These sons of wild animals have dared to murder a daughter of Umuofia.”...And in a clear unemotional voice he told Umuofia how their daughter had gone to market at Mbaino and had been killed. (2.6)

#### THOUGHT:

The speaker refers to the Umuofia clan as one big family. Thus, the murder of the girl is considered a blow to the family, and therefore a personal offense to everyone in Umuofia. Notice the speaker uses “their daughter” to describe the victim and thus riles up the crowd against the Mbaino.

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

[Okonkwo] was a very strong man and rarely felt fatigue. But his wives and children were not as strong, and so they suffered. But they dared not complain openly. Okonkwo’s first son, Nwoye, was then twelve years old but was already causing his father great anxiety for his incipient laziness. At any rate, that was how it looked to his father, and he sought to correct him by constant nagging and beating. And so Nwoye was developing into a sad-faced youth. (2.13)

#### THOUGHT:

As the head of his household, Okonkwo is free to be a tyrant and drive his wives and children to work too hard. Okonkwo’s loathing for laziness

(carried over from his hatred of his father) causes him to lash out on anyone who seems the slightest bit idle, including his own son. By abusing his young son, it seems that Okonkwo is turning father-hating into a new trend in his family. Okonkwo hated his own father, and though he is trying to do right by his own son, he's in fact only pushing the boy away.

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men usually had. He did not inherit a barn from his father. There was no barn to inherit. (3.1)

THOUGHT:

Unoka, Okonkwo's father, proves deficient in providing for his family. Based on the family roles valued in Igbo culture, one could argue that Unoka is a bad father.

[Go to CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Anasi was the first wife and the others could not drink before her, and so they stood waiting.

Anasi was a middle-aged woman, tall and strongly built. There was authority in her bearing and she looked every inch the ruler of the womenfolk in a large and prosperous family. She wore the anklet of her husband's titles, which the first wife alone could wear.

She walked up to her husband and accepted the horn from him. She then went down on one knee, drank a little and handed back the horn. She rose, called him by his name and went back to her hut. The other wives drank in the same way, in their proper order, and went away. (3.15-17)

#### THOUGHT:

Families have very specific structures – multiple wives for a single man and a hierarchy of women within the household, all of whom are subservient to their husband.

[Go to CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

[...] what made it worse in Okonkwo's case was that he had to support his mother and two sisters from his meager harvest. And supporting his mother also meant supporting his father. She could not be expected cook and eat while her husband starved. And so at a very early age when he was striving desperately to build a barn through share-cropping Okonkwo was also fending for his father's house. It was like pouring grains of corn into a bag full of holes. His mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women's crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava. (3.28)

#### THOUGHT:

Okonkwo, unlike his father, feels an obligation to provide for his family, even his lazy and ungrateful father. Since Okonkwo's father does not work to be a good provider for his family, he is failure as a husband and father based on traditional Umuofia values. Because his father didn't live up to his role as provider, Okonkwo had to break the usual family model and become the head of the household, providing for his mother and sisters.

[Go to CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Even Okonkwo himself became very fond of the boy – inwardly of course...there was no doubt that he liked the boy. Sometimes when he went to big village meetings or communal ancestral feasts he allowed Ikemefuna

to accompany him, like a son, carrying his stool and his goatskin bag. And, indeed, Ikemefuna called him father. (4.7)

THOUGHT:

After a while, Okonkwo becomes so fond of Ikemefuna that he comes to think of him as a son. Ikemefuna reciprocates the feeling, adoring Okonkwo enough that he calls him his father. Out of affection, Okonkwo extends his notion of family to include Ikemefuna even though the boy isn't related to him by blood or even clan membership.

[Go to CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“Where are her [Ojiugo’s] children? Did she take them?” he asked with unusual coolness and restraint.

“They are here,” answered his first wife, Nwoye’s mother. Okonkwo bent down and looked into her hut. Ojiugo’s children were eating with the children of his first wife. (4.13-14)

THOUGHT:

Wives often look out for each other, banding together against their husband to minimize their suffering. Here, Nwoye’s mother takes care of Ojiugo’s children for her while she is out and even lies to Okonkwo to prevent too severe a punishment.

[Go to CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Ikemefuna had begun to feel like a member of Okonkwo’s family. He still thought about his mother and his three-year-old sister, and he had moments of sadness and depression. But he and Nwoye had become so deeply

attached to each other that such moments became less frequent and less poignant. (4.38)

THOUGHT:

Ikemefuna has lived long enough with Okonkwo's family to start feeling like a part of it, especially since he has developed such a close relationship with Nwoye. To Ikemefuna, mutual affection is the basis of a family, not shared blood.

[Go to CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

The Feast of the New Yam was approaching and Umuofia was in a festival mood. It was an occasion for giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility. Ani played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed father of the clan whose bodies had been committed to the earth.

The Feast of the New Yam was held every year before the harvest began, to honor the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan... So much was cooked that, no matter how heavily the family ate or how many friends and relatives they invited from neighboring villages, there was always a large quantity of food left over at the end of the day. (5.1-2)

THOUGHT:

This feast is designed to celebrate the family. Ancestors are honored in the name of Ani, the earth goddess, who keeps their bodies in her hold. People also honor their current family by inviting all their relations to splurge at their feast.

[Go to CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY](#)



QUOTE:

The three women talked excitedly about the relations who had been invited, and the children reveled in the thought of being spoiled by these visitors from the motherland. (5.5)

THOUGHT:

The reunion of family members is an exciting prospect for the women, many of whom moved to a new village when they got married. They cannot wait to see their own blood relations.

[Go to CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“Ekwefi,” she said, “is it true that when people are grown up, fire does not burn them?” Ezinma, unlike most children, called her mother by her name. (5.16)

THOUGHT:

Ezinma is an anomaly in the Igbo family unit because she does not address her mother with a term of respect – like mother – but by her given name, as if they are equals.

[Go to CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“Will you give Ezinma some fire to bring to me?” Her [Nwoye’s mother’s] own children and Ikemefuna had gone to the stream.

Ekwefi put a few live coals into a piece of broken pot and Ezinma carried it across the clean swept compound to Nwoye’s mother.

“Thank you, Nma,” she said. She was peeling new yams, and in a basket beside her were green vegetables and beans.

“Let me make the fire for you,” Ezinma offered.

“Thank you, Ezigbo,” she said. She often called her Ezigbo, which means “the good one.” (5.30-34)

#### THOUGHT:

Women within the same family maintain a solidarity in which they help each other, putting aside personal jealousies, to keep the family running.

[Go to CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Ekwefi ladled her husband’s share of the pottage into a bowl and covered it. Ezinma took it to him in his *obi*.

Okonkwo was sitting on a goatskin already eating his first wife’s meal. Obiageli, who had brought it from her mother’s hut, sat on the floor waiting for him to finish...

He uncovered his second wife’s dish and began to eat from it. Obiageli took the first dish and returned to her mother’s hut. And then Nkechi came in, bringing the third dish. Nkechi was the daughter of Okonkwo’s third wife. (5.54-65)

#### THOUGHT:

In this family ritual, the husband eats one dish from each of his wives, in the order that he married them. The daughters of each wife bring in the dish to their father in the correct order. Domestic life is very organized in Igbo society.

[Go to CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Chielo]: “And how is my daughter, Ezinma?” (6.11)

THOUGHT:

Chielo is so fond of Ezinma that she calls her “my daughter” even though she has no blood relation to her. Calling Ezinma by a name denoting a family relationship is a way of showing deep affection and love.

[Go to CHAPTER 6 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Ezedu]: “That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death.” (7.15)

THOUGHT:

It is considered a crime to kill a member of your own family. Even though Okonkwo isn't Ikemefuna's father by blood, the boy thinks of Okonkwo as his father, so it might as well be the case as far as Ezedu is concerned.

[Go to CHAPTER 7 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

He could hardly imagine that Okonkwo was not his real father. He had never been fond of his real father, and at the end of three years he had become very distant indeed. (7.26)

THOUGHT:

Because he considers Okonkwo his real father, Ikemefuna does not feel fear as he is led into the woods to be slaughtered. The boy considers himself Okonkwo's true son because of the bond of affection they share – something which Ikemefuna lacked with his biological father.

[Go to CHAPTER 7 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Okonkwo did not taste any food for two days after the death of Ikemefuna. He drank palm-wine from morning till night, and his eyes were red and fierce like the eyes of a rat when it was caught by the tail and dashed against the floor. He called his son, Nwoye, to sit with him in his *obi*. But the boy was afraid of him and slipped out of the hut as soon as he noticed him dozing. (8.1)

THOUGHT:

Even though social structure dictates that Okonkwo had the right to kill Ikemefuna since the boy was neither a blood relation or a clan member, Okonkwo feels horribly guilty. Okonkwo's lack of appetite for two days gives away his guilty conscience. Even though the feeling was not backed up by clan laws, Okonkwo's entire household considered Ikemefuna a member of the family because of their affection for him. Nwoye, for his part, now fears his father – if Okonkwo could murder his son Ikemefuna who he loved, what will prevent him from doing the same to the less favored son, Nwoye? When viewing Ikemefuna as a member of Okonkwo's family, Okonkwo has failed as a father because he didn't protect his son. At this point, Okonkwo's family begins falling apart for lack of trust.

[Go to CHAPTER 8 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

At last Ezinma was born, and although ailing she seemed determined to live. At first Ekwefi accepted her, as she had accepted others – with listless resignation. But when she lived on to her fourth, fifth and sixth years, love returned once more to her mother, and, with love, anxiety. She determined to nurse her child to health, and she put all her being into it. She was rewarded by occasional spells of health during which Ezinma bubbled with energy like fresh palm-wine. At such times she seemed beyond danger. But all of a sudden she would go down again...Ekwefi believed deep inside her that Ezinma had come to stay. She believed because it was that faith alone that gave her own life any kind of meaning. (9.25)

#### THOUGHT:

Ekwefi's sole reason for being is to nurture her daughter back to health. After so many disappointments, she pours all the frustrated love she's held back into Ezinma. It could be said that she keeps Ezinma alive in those first fragile years by sheer force of will and love.

[Go to CHAPTER 9 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

[Uzowulu]: "That woman standing there is my wife, Mgbafo. I married her with my money and my yams. I do not owe my in-laws anything. I owe them no yams. I owe them no coco-yams. One morning three of them came to my house, beat me up and took my wife and children away. This happened in the rainy season. I have waited in vain for my wife to return. At last I went to my in-laws and said to them, 'You have taken back your sister. I did not send her away. You yourselves took her. The law of the clan is that you should return her bride-price.' But my wife's brothers said they had nothing to tell me. So I have brought the matter to the fathers of the clan. My case is finished. I salute you." (10.24)

#### THOUGHT:

Uzowulu's case concerns the rights he has to his family by Igbo law. He wants either his wife back or the money he paid for her.

[Go to CHAPTER 10 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

On the following morning the entire neighborhood wore a festive air because Okonkwo's friend, Obierika, was celebrating his daughter's *uri*. It was the day on which her suitor (having already paid the greater part of her bride-price) would bring palm-wine not only to her parents and immediate relatives but to the wide and extensive group of kinsmen called *umanna*. Everybody had been invited – men, women and children. But it was really a woman's ceremony and the central figures were the bride and her mother. (12.1)

THOUGHT:

During a daughter's *uri*, women are finally acknowledged as important parts of the family and given free rein to plan the festival and feast.

[Go to CHAPTER 12 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

He [Obierika] remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offense on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offense against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender. (13.16)

THOUGHT:

Obierika regrets disposing of his twins just because the law decreed it so. But he understands that if a crime against the goddess goes unpunished, her

wrath will fall not only upon the offender, but also upon his whole family and extended family – even the clan itself.

[Go to CHAPTER 13 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Okonkwo was well received by his mother's kinsmen in Mbanta. The old man who received him was his mother's younger brother, who was now the eldest surviving member of that family. His name was Uchendu, and it was he who had received Okonkwo's mother twenty and ten years before when she had been brought home from Umuofia to be buried with her people. Okonkwo was only a boy then and Uchendu still remembered him crying the traditional farewell: "Mother, mother, mother is going." (14.1)

THOUGHT:

Though Uchendu has only seen Okonkwo once, he welcomes Okonkwo because he is family, no matter what kind of crime Okonkwo committed.

[Go to CHAPTER 14 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

"Is it right that you, Okonkwo, should bring to your mother a heavy face and refuse to be comforted? Be careful or you may displease the dead. Your duty is to comfort your wives and children and take them back to your fatherland after seven years. But if you allow sorrow to weigh you down and kill you, they will all die in exile." (14.32)

THOUGHT:

Uchendu implies that Okonkwo has a duty to honor his mother by refusing to give way to despair. As the head of his household, he also has the responsibility of setting a positive example for his wives and children. If he does not do so, that is a crime. When crimes are committed, they always

impact the entire family. Just as Okonkwo's family must share in his exile, they may also fall to death if Okonkwo sins against his mother by despairing in his motherland.

[Go to CHAPTER 14 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Uchendu]: "I knew your father, Iweka. He was a great man. He had many friends here and came to see them quite often. Those were good days when a man had friends in distant clans. Your generation does not know that. You stay at home, afraid of your next-door neighbor. Even a man's motherland is a strange to him nowadays." (15.7)

THOUGHT:

Uchendu criticizes the younger generation for falling out of touch with their relations in distant villages. The implication is that younger men have become so self-centered that they do not have time to think about and honor their extended family, especially if they live far away.

[Go to CHAPTER 15 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

"What are you doing here?" Obierika had asked when after many difficulties the missionaries had allowed him to speak to the boy.

"I am one of them," replied Nwoye.

"How is your father?" Obierika asked, not knowing what else to say.

"I don't know. He is not my father," said Nwoye, unhappily.



And so Obierika went to Mbanta to see his friend. And he found that Okonkwo did not wish to speak about Nwoye. (16.3-6)

THOUGHT:

Both parties – father and son – have expressed a wish to isolate themselves from each other and cut off all contact or means of association. Each is ashamed to be connected to the other now, Nwoye because he has never forgiven his father for killing Ikemefuna and Okonkwo, because of Nwoye's new religion. Despite their shared blood, there is no affection or respect in their relationships, and thus they no longer consider each other to be family.

[Go to CHAPTER 16 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

When they had all gathered, the white man began to speak...He spoke through an interpreter who was an Ibo man...He said he was one of them, as they could see from his color and his language. The other four black men were also their brothers, although one of them did not speak Ibo. The white man was also their brother because they were all sons of God. And he told them about this new God, the Creator of all the world and all the men and women. (16.9)

THOUGHT:

The interpreter for the missionaries claims kinship with the Umuofia due to his skin color and language. However, he is mistaken in his claim of familiarity because his dialect is different enough to draw ridicule. Thus, his claims that the white man is also their brother because some arbitrary god said so is met with skepticism and downright scorn in the clan. Though the people of Umuofia do extend their understanding of family to their whole clan, kinship never expands to encompass other clans, and certainly not white men.

[Go to CHAPTER 16 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then.” The crowd agreed.

“I did not say He had a wife,” said the interpreter, somewhat lamely.

“Your buttocks said he had a son,” said the joker. So he must have a wife and all of them must have buttocks.” (16.20-22)

THOUGHT:

The Igbo people understandably conclude that the missionaries must be mad to claim that a son of god has no mother. It goes against the very fabric of their society to make such a claim and breaks down the hierarchy of the family. They do not understand the concept of the immaculate conception or the Trinity.

[Go to CHAPTER 16 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Nneka had had four previous pregnancies and childbirths. But each time she had borne twins, and they had been immediately thrown away. Her husband and his family were already becoming highly critical of such a woman and were not unduly perturbed when they found she had fled to join the Christians. It was a good riddance. (17.13)

THOUGHT:

In her crucial role as part of the family – the mother of her husband’s children – Nneka has failed and thus is deemed worthless to the family. Yet,

it is this very worthlessness and forlornness that wins her a new family among the Christians.

[Go to CHAPTER 17 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Mr. Kiaga's joy was very great. "Blessed is he who forsakes his father and his mother for my sake," he intoned. "Those that hear my words are my father and my mother."

Nwoye did not fully understand. But he was happy to leave his father. He would return later to his mother and his brothers and sisters and convert them to the new faith. (17.23-24)

THOUGHT:

Christianity has concepts contradictory to Nwoye's young mind. It asks followers to forsake their families to show loyalty to God. Yet at the same time, the religion reaffirms the sanctity of family in its very language, calling one's peers brothers and sisters. While he's happy to use his new religion as a justification for cutting ties with his father, Nwoye still loves his mother and sisters, and hopes eventually to bring them into his new family of Christian converts.

[Go to CHAPTER 17 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Mr. Kiaga]: "We are all children of God and we must receive these our brothers." (18.8)

THOUGHT:

Christianity encourages its followers to expand their notion of family to God as the father of all humans. Thus, Mr. Kiaga insists that all humans are

his brothers and sisters and therefore he cannot refuse anyone – even the social outcasts – admission to his church.

[Go to CHAPTER 18 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Uchendu]: “We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its itching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him.” (19.9)

THOUGHT:

Uchendu celebrates family much as the Christians celebrate brotherhood, by claiming that everyone in the family must help one another. He considers the support a family gives one another the defining characteristic of humanity. Without family or respect for your family, you might as well be an animal.

[Go to CHAPTER 19 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“It is good in these days when the younger generation consider themselves wiser than their sires to see a man doing things in the grand, old way. A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so.” (19.24)

THOUGHT:

A family feast is not thrown to meet a family’s physical need for sustenance; it is a loftier event than that. A feast is a celebration of the family’s kinship.

[Go to CHAPTER 19 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“But I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter’s dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. I fear for you; I fear for you the clan.” (19.24)

THOUGHT:

This elder laments that the family of the clan has fallen apart and turned upon each other. He believes that Christianity is bad because it has motivated the break of up individual families and the solidarity of the clan. The clan is no longer “one voice” that speaks or one united body that acts for the good of all.

[Go to CHAPTER 19 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Obierika]: “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. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” (20.26)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo’s family, the tribe, has fallen apart because it has crumbled from within. The family of tribal brothers has turned against one another and can

no longer act as a group. Now, opposing the missionaries means opposing the tribal brothers as well.

[Go to CHAPTER 20 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[After the unmasking of an *egwugwu*]: That night the Mother of the Spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night. Not even the oldest man in Umuofia had ever heard such a strange and fearful sound, and it was never to be heard again. It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming – its own death. (22.10)

THOUGHT:

The Umuofia consider the *egwugwu* part of their family – the spirits of their great ancestors. When an *egwugwu* is murdered by being unmasked, the crime can be considered an extreme case of patricide – the murder of one of the great fathers of the land.

[Go to CHAPTER 22 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“This is a great gathering. No clan can boast of greater numbers of greater valor. But are we all here? I ask you: Are all the sons of Umuofia with us here?” A deep murmur swept through the crowd.

“They are not,” he said. “They have broken the clan and gone their several ways. We who are here this morning have remained true to our fathers, but our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland. If we fight the stranger we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamed of such a

thing, they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them. So we must do what our fathers would never have done.” (24.32-33)

THOUGHT:

An elder claims that the broken family of Umuofia is the single most important reason that they should go to war, even if it means harming their own brothers who have defected to join the missionaries. It shows how far the Umuofia have fallen that they see the necessity to commit the ultimate crime – brothers must kill their own brothers in order to save the clan/family as a whole.

[Go to CHAPTER 24 SUMMARY](#)

## **Theme and Quote Analysis on: Respect and Reputation**

### **Theme Summary**

Reputation is extremely important to the men in the novel. Personal reputation is publicly denoted by the ankle bracelets men wear, which signify the number of “titles” they have earned. Reputation is based on merit – men gain reputation through bravery in battle, skill at wrestling, and hard work as seen through the size of their yam harvest. Reputation earns men positions of power and influence in the community as well as numerous wives. Okonkwo, the novel’s protagonist, is extremely concerned with reputation because he grew up with a father who was shameful and lazy. Okonkwo overcompensates by working tirelessly on his farm and taking every opportunity available to prove his bravery and strength.

### **Study Questions**

1. Does a man’s reputation in Umuofia usually accurately denote his personal value?
2. On what factors are a man’s reputation based? Is reputation in Umuofia based on merit or based on some other qualities?
3. What factors influence a woman’s reputation?
4. Is Okonkwo’s desire for a strong reputation positive? Does it ever get in the way of his obligations, especially to his family and to the gods?
5. Does Okonkwo’s reputation in Umuofia remain the same or does it change over the course of the book?

### **Sample Thesis Statements**



Though reputation may be an accurate indicator of a man's work ethic, it says nothing about his merit as a husband, father, or friend.

Reputation in Umuofia is based entirely on personal merit.

### **Quotes & Thoughts on Respect and Reputation**

QUOTE:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. (1.1)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo gains respect for himself and his village by proving his mettle in a physical contest – wrestling.

[Go to CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[...] during this time Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan [...]. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. (1.3)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo equates reputation with physical prowess and courage. He is so proud of his own reputation that he cannot stand less successful men. Though he is a highly ranked man in his village, you can't help but wonder if such an aggressive and prideful man merits the good reputation he has.

[Go to CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Okoye [...] was not a failure like Unoka. He had a large barn full of yams and he had three wives. And now he was going to take the Idemili title, the third highest in the land. (1.12)

THOUGHT:

One way of gaining others' respect is through possession of material goods like barns, many yams, and even multiple wives. Gaining a title, a sign of honor from the clan, is one of the highest forms of mutual respect a man can earn.

[Go to CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

When Unoka died he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt. Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him? Fortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father. Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. (1.16)

THOUGHT:

Reputation in Okonkwo's clan isn't inherited. Each man earns his own reputation – good or bad – based on his own behavior and actions. Even

though Okonkwo has the ability to earn respect like every other man, he still acts as if he's somehow tarnished by his relationship with his father. Much of his behavior is motivated by a desire to separate himself from his father's reputation.

[Go to CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Umuofia was feared by all its neighbors. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country. Its most potent war medicine was as old as the clan itself...

And so the neighboring clans who naturally knew of these things feared Umuofia, and would not go to war against it without first trying a peaceful settlement. (2.8-9)

THOUGHT:

One way a tribe gains respect is to boast powerful magic in the form of a mysterious medicinal figure. This intimidates other tribes from warring with Umuofia and leads them to attempt peace treaties before declaring war. Thus a fearful reputation serves an important purpose for Umuofia.

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QUOTE:

Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household. He had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. His own hut, or obi, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his wives had her own hut, which together formed a half moon behind the obi. The barn was built against one end of the red walls, and long stacks of yam stood out prosperously in it. At the opposite end of the compound was a shed for the goats, and each wife built a small attachment to her hut for the hens. Near

the barn was a small house, the “medicine house” or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm-wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children. (2.14)

THOUGHT:

It is easy to see why Okonkwo is respected. His hard work has earned material wealth for his family out of nothing. He has a large living compound, several wives, and many children.

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QUOTE:

With a father like Unoka, Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men had. He neither inherited a barn nor a title, nor even a young wife. But in spite of these disadvantages, he had begun even in his father’s lifetime to lay the foundations of a prosperous future. It was slow and painful. But he threw himself into it like one possessed. And indeed he was possessed by the fear of his father’s contemptible life and shameful death. (3.9)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo has a relentless drive improve his reputation. He’s completely a self-made man.

[Go to CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Nwakibie]: “Many young men have come to me to ask for yams but I have refused because I knew they would just dump them in the earth and leave them to be choked by weeds...But I can trust you. I know it as I look at

you...I shall give you twice four hundred yams. Go ahead and prepare your farm.” (3.26)

THOUGHT:

Nwakibie respects Okonkwo for his dedication to hard work. Okonkwo's reputation precedes him and wins him Nwakibie's trust.

[Go to CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[...] he was struck, as most people were, by Okonkwo's brusqueness in dealing with less successful men. Only a week ago a man had contradicted him at a kindred meeting which they held to discuss the next ancestral feast. Without looking at the man Okonkwo had said. "This meeting is for men." The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman. Okonkwo knew how to kill a man's spirit. (4.1)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo's strong reputation and respect in the community has made him a bit fatheaded. He has an aura of arrogance and has little pity for those less fortunate or competent than himself.

[Go to CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

But it was really not true that Okonkwo's palm-kernels had been cracked for him by a benevolent spirit. He had cracked them himself. Anyone who knew his grim struggle against poverty and misfortune could not say he had been lucky....At an early age he had achieved fame as the greatest wrestler in all the land. That was not luck. At the most one could say that his *chi* or personal god was good. But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man

says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed. (4.3)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo hasn't really benefited from luck and does not attribute his success to it. He made his own way in the world, guided only by his flaming ambition and indomitable will.

[Go to CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Within a short time the first two bouts were over. But the third created a big sensation even among the elders who did not usually show their excitement so openly. It was as quick as the other two, perhaps even quicker. But very few people had ever seen that kind of wrestling before. As soon as the two boys closed in, one of them did something which no one could describe because it had been as quick as a flash. And the other boy was flat on his back. The crowd roared and clapped and for a while drowned the frenzied drums. Okonkwo sprang to his feet and quickly sat down again. Three young men from the victorious boy's team ran forward, carried him shoulder high and danced through the cheering crowd. Everybody soon knew who the boy was. His name was Maduka, the son of Obierika. (6.6)

THOUGHT:

Wrestling – a show of physical prowess – is one way of gaining a strong reputation in the clan. Even Okonkwo watches the Maduka with admiration.

[Go to CHAPTER 6 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Okafo was swept off his feet by his supporters and carried home shoulder high. They sang his praise and the young women clapped their hands:

*“Who will wrestle for our village?  
Okafo will wrestle for our village.  
Has he thrown a hundred men?  
He has thrown four hundred men.  
Has he thrown a hundred Cats?  
He has thrown four hundred Cats.  
Then send him word to fight for us.” (6.24)*

THOUGHT:

For winning a difficult and exciting wrestling match, Okafo’s name is immortalized in song. He wins great respect and glory for his accomplishment.

[Go to CHAPTER 6 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Okonkwo sat in his *obi* crunching happily with Ikemefuna and Nwoye... when Ogbuefi Ezeudu came in. Ezeudu was the oldest man in this quarter of Umuofia. He had been a great and fearless warrior in his time, and was now accorded great respect in all the clan. (7.14)

THOUGHT:

For showing matchless courage and prowess on the battlefield, Ezeudu is revered throughout the clan. His reputation garners him great respect.

[Go to CHAPTER 7 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“I think it is good that our clan holds the *ozo* title in high esteem,” said Okonkwo. “In those other clans you speak of, *ozo* is so low that every beggar takes it.” (8.56)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo, because he’s very proud of his strong reputation, is pleased that positions of respect in his community are publicly known and difficult to achieve. This means that his status in the community is an elite and meaningful accomplishment.

[Go to CHAPTER 8 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

None of his converts was a man whose word was heeded in the assembly of the people. None of them was a man of title. They were mostly the kind of people that were called *efulefu*, worthless, empty men. The imagery of an *efulefu* in the language of the clan was a man who sold his machete and wore the sheath to battle. Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, called the converts the excrement of the clan, and the new faith was a mad dog that had come to eat it up. (16.1)

THOUGHT:

Christianity begins as a worthless, ill-respected religion amongst the Igbo. According to the Igbo, only men who have nothing left in life would ever stoop to so low as to take up the offers of a foreign, effeminate people.

[Go to CHAPTER 16 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

These outcasts, or *osu*, seeing that the new religion welcomed twins and such abominations, thought that it was possible that they would also be received. And so one Sunday two of them went into the church. There was



an immediate stir; but so great was the work the new religion had done among the converts that they did not immediately leave the church when the outcasts came in. (18.7)

THOUGHT:

The outcasts, who have lost all reputation within their clan, see that their only way of redeeming themselves is to join the Christians.

[Go to CHAPTER 18 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

He was a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart – a taboo for ever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the free-born. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste – long, tangled and dirty hair. A razor was taboo to him. An *osu* could not attend an assembly of the free-born, and they, in turn, could not shelter under his roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest. How could such a man be a follower of Christ? (18.12)

THOUGHT:

The lowest social class wears a physical symbol of their poor reputation – long, tangled hair – allowing them to be easily identified.

[Go to CHAPTER 18 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Okonkwo called his three wives and told them to get things together for a great feast. “I must thank my mother’s kinsmen before I go,” he said. (19.6)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo shows his respect and gratitude to his mother's people before going home.

[Go to CHAPTER 19 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Okonkwo never did things by halves. When his wife Ekwefi protested that two goats were sufficient for the feast he told her that it was not her affair.

“I am calling a feast because I have the wherewithal. I cannot live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle. My mother's people have been good to me and I must show my gratitude.”

And so three goats were slaughtered and a number of fowls. It was like a wedding feast. There was foo-foo and yam pottage, egusi soup and bitter-leaf soup and pots and pots of palm-wine. (19.16-18)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo wants to gain the respect of all the Mbanta people and is too proud to offer a lowly feast. So he goes a bit overboard in order to gain a reputation as a generous and wealthy man.

[Go to CHAPTER 19 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

He [Okonkwo] knew that he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan. He had lost the chance to lead his warlike clan against the new religion, which, he was told, had gained ground. He had lost the years in which he might have taken the highest titles in the land. But some of these losses were not irreparable. He was

determined that his return should be marked by his people. He would return with a flourish, and regain the seven wasted years. (20.2)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo has not yet lost his ambitious spirit. Though he has suffered a great setback by living in exile for seven years, he vows to remedy his reputation upon his return to Umuofia.

[Go to CHAPTER 20 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Even in his first year in exile he had begun to plan for his return. The first thing he would do would be to rebuild his compound on a more magnificent scale. He would build a bigger barn than he had had before and he would build huts for two new wives. Then he would show his wealth by initiating his sons into the *ozo* society. Only the really great men in the clan were able to do this. Okonkwo saw clearly the high esteem in which he would be held, and he saw himself taking the highest title in the land. (20.3)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo is so ambitious that starts planning his return to Umuofia years before he's allowed to come back to his fatherland. He has high hopes of surrounding his name with even greater glory than he has already won. Okonkwo can increase his reputation in his home community through his family – marrying off his beautiful daughters, initiating his sons into the elite *ozo* society, and marrying more wives.

[Go to CHAPTER 20 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

The six men ate nothing throughout that day and the next. They were not even given any water to drink, and they could not go out to urinate or go

into the bush when they were pressed. At night the messengers came in to taunt them and to knock their shaven heads together. (23.16)

THOUGHT:

The guards make a point of showing the leaders of Umuofia that their strong reputations mean nothing to white men.

[Go to CHAPTER 23 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Obierika, who had been gazing steadily at his friend's dangling body, turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." (25.18)

THOUGHT:

Obierika speaks out in defense of his good friend Okonkwo and espousing his honor and greatness. He feels indignant that the white invaders drove such a great man to destroy his reputation by committing the crime of suicide.

[Go to CHAPTER 25 SUMMARY](#)

## **Theme and Quote Analysis on: Fear**

### **Theme Summary**

Many of the characters suffer from fear of some sort. Okonkwo fears becoming like his lazy, shameful father, Ekwefi fears losing her daughter, and Nwoye fears his father's wrath. While most characters fear events that are outside of their control, Okonkwo is consumed by a terrible internal worry about himself and his identity. Rather than mastering his fear, he allows it to dominate him and drive his actions. Fear leads him to lash out in some pretty nasty ways: beating his wives, abusing and alienating his oldest son, partaking in the murder of his adoptive son, etc. Overall, fear in this novel leads characters to behave in negative ways that can bring the wrath of the gods, guilt, and the community disapproval upon them.

### **Study Questions**

1. What does Okonkwo fear? How does he (over)compensate for it?
2. What is the difference, if any, between fear of external things – the gods, loss of family members, etc. – and fear of internal aspects of oneself or one's nature?
3. According to what we know about Ekwefi, what is a mother's greatest fear?
4. How can fear be a positive force? What useful things does fear push some characters to do?
5. How does fear of the unknown and misunderstanding of different cultures affect the Umuofia and the Christians? Does either side ever really try to understand each other? If so, name the specific characters.

## Sample Thesis Statements

Although Okonkwo performs every action with the deliberate purpose of appearing fearless, he is ultimately ruled by fear – the fear of appearing to have fear.

## Quotes & Thoughts on Fear

### QUOTE:

[...] he [Okonkwo] was not afraid of war. He was a man of action, a man of war. Unlike his father he could stand the look of blood. In Umuofia's latest war he was the first to bring home a human head. (2.4)

### THOUGHT:

Okonkwo, unlike his father, has no fear of violence, but actually revels in it. Fearlessness in war is a highly respected quality in Umuofia.

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

### QUOTE:

Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external, but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was *agbala*. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken to title. And so Okonkwo

was ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness. (2.12)

THOUGHT:

Despite all of Okonkwo's showy manliness, he is ruled by fear – a profound fear of being deemed weak and feminine, like his father. Essentially, Okonkwo fears nothing but himself.

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

As for the boy himself, he was terribly afraid. He could not understand what was happening to him or what he had done. How could he know that his father had taken a hand in killing a daughter of Umuofia? All he knew was that a few men had arrived at their house, conversing with his father in low tones, and at the end he had been taken out and handed over to a stranger. His mother had wept bitterly, but he had been too surprised to weep. (2.20)

THOUGHT:

Ikemefuna's fear stems from deep disorientation, unfamiliarity, and uncertainty about what the future will hold. With a child's limited understanding of the social world around him, he cannot begin to comprehend the series of events that led to his sudden and painful separation from his family. All he knows is that he wants to go home.

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

When Okonkwo heard that he [Ikemefuna] would not eat any food he came into the hut with a big stick in his hand and stood over him while he swallowed his yams, trembling. A few moments later he went behind the hut and began to vomit painfully. (4.5)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo rules his household based on fear. Not only does he scare Ikemefuna into eating, but his wives have to tip-toe around him for fear of a beating.

[Go to CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Okonkwo was specially fond of Ezinma. She looked very much like her mother, who was once the village beauty. But his fondness only showed on very rare occasions. (5.60)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo is afraid of showing his emotions too openly, unless they are feelings of anger or aggression. Because he fears being effeminate and losing community respect, he shies away from showing even his favorite child affection.

[Go to CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

One of the men behind him cleared his throat. Ikemefuna looked back, and the man growled at him to go on and not stand looking back. The way he said it sent cold fear down Ikemefuna's back. His hands trembled vaguely on the black pot he carried. Why had Okonkwo withdrawn to the rear? Ikemefuna felt his legs melting under him. And he was afraid to look back.

As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his machete, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, "My father, they have killed me!" as he ran



towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak. (7.27-28)

THOUGHT:

It is not only Ikemefuna who feels fear when hearing the man so mysteriously clear his throat; Okonkwo, too, we know, fears what is about to come. Every nerve in Okonkwo tells him this is wrong, but when the moment comes, he kills his adopted son. Ikemefuna and Okonkwo's fears are contrasted here. Ikemefuna fears the men with machetes and death, both of which he has no control over. Okonkwo, on the other hand, fears losing his sense of masculinity – an internal fear which he could control, but instead gives into.

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QUOTE:

But Ekwefi did not hear these consolations. She stood for a while, and then, all of a sudden, made up her mind. She hurried through Okonkwo's hut and went outside. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"I am following Chielo," she replied and disappeared in the darkness. (11.50-51)

THOUGHT:

Out of Ekwefi's intense fear that her only daughter will be hurt, Ekwefi finds the desperate courage to follow Chielo and risk the gods' disapproval.

[Go to CHAPTER 11 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

And then the priestess screamed. "Somebody is walking behind me!" she said. "Whether you are spirit or man, may Agbala shave your head with a

blunt razor! May he twist your neck until you see your heels!”

Ekwefi stood rooted to the spot. One mind said to her: “Woman, go home before Agbala does you harm.” But she could not. (11.56-57)

THOUGHT:

Chielo’s threats of horrible physical injury at the god’s hostile hands understandably mortify Ekwefi. However, her love for Ezinma gives her courage to conquer her fear of the gods.

[Go to CHAPTER 11 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

She had prayed for the moon to rise. But now she found the half-light of the incipient moon more terrifying than darkness. The world was now peopled with vague, fantastic figures that dissolved under her steady gaze and then formed again in new shapes. At one stage Ekwefi was so afraid that she nearly called out Chielo for companionship and human sympathy. What she had seen was the shape of a man climbing a palm tree, his head pointing to the earth and his legs skywards. But at that very moment Chielo’s voice rose again in her possessed chanting, and Ekwefi recoiled, because there was no humanity there. It was not the same Chielo who sat with her in the market and sometimes bought beancakes for Ezinma, whom she called her daughter. It was a different woman – the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves. Ekwefi trudged along between two fears. (11.62)

THOUGHT:

The unfamiliar and unseen environment intensifies and exaggerates Ekwefi’s imagination and her fear. So Ekwefi is trapped between two fears – one of the unknown darkness around her and the other of the possessed Chielo abducting her daughter.

[Go to CHAPTER 11 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“But I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter’s dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. I fear for you; I fear for you the clan.” (19.24)

THOUGHT:

The elders fear, rightly, that the younger men have forgotten their bonds of kinship and that has led to their downfall. Because the younger generation hasn’t held the clan together, their future is unknown, which is terrifying.

[Go to CHAPTER 19 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

The leaders of the Christians had met together at Mr. Smith’s parsonage on the previous night. As they deliberated they could hear the Mother of Spirits wailing for her son. The chilling sound affected Mr. Smith, and for the first time he seemed to be afraid. (22.13)

THOUGHT:

Mr. Smith naturally fears something with which he is unfamiliar – the mourning and raging cry of a foreign god. This is also the first time that he has not been in complete control of the situation in Umuofia.

[Go to CHAPTER 22 SUMMARY](#)

## Theme and Quote Analysis on: Religion

### Theme Summary

The Igbo gods are mostly manifestations of nature and its elements, which makes sense because they are an agricultural society that depends on the regularity of seasons and natural phenomena to survive. They worship the goddess of the earth and are always careful to avoid committing sins against her for fear of vengeance that might wipe out an entire generation. The Igbo ancestors also take on a divine nature to some extent. Family plays such a central role in Igbo life that the spirits of their ancestors are consulted for almost every decision and even serve as judges in legal trials (in the form of masked elders). The Igbo emphasis on numerous gods associated with nature and also on ancestors and somewhat divine contrasts sharply with the single God of Christianity which seems far less directly relevant to the Igbo lifestyle.

### Study Questions

1. What is the nature of the Igbo gods? What sorts of elements or concepts do they represent? What does this indicate about Igbo culture?
2. Why do you think there is so much superstition surrounding children (abandoned twins, *ogbanje* children)?
3. Are the Igbo gods vengeful? When compared to Christianity? What sort of justice do they carry out?
4. Do the Umuofia truly believe that the *egwugwu* are ancestral spirits or do they realize that they are masked elders of the clan?
5. Did all of the villagers and Mr. Smith actually hear a goddess crying? How is the reader supposed to interpret the scene in which the Mother of the Spirits is weeping?

## **Sample Thesis Statements**

The essence of the Igbo beliefs is contrary to the monotheistic Christian religion promoted by the missionaries.

Despite the Igbo's polytheistic belief system, their gods are all different facets of one supreme god, ultimately similar to the Christian deity.

## **Quotes & Thoughts on Religion**

### QUOTE:

Umuofia was feared by all its neighbors. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country. Its most potent war medicine was as old as the clan itself. Nobody knew how old. But on one point there was general agreement – the active principle in that medicine had been an old woman with one leg. In fact, the medicine itself was called *agadi-nwayi*, or old woman. It had its shrine in the centre of Umuofia, in a clearing spot. And if anybody was so foolhardy as to pass by the shrine after dusk he was sure to see the old woman hopping about.

And so the neighboring clans who naturally knew of these things feared Umuofia, and would not go to war against it without first trying a peaceful settlement. (2.8-9)

### THOUGHT:

The Igbo people fear what they do not understand – like medicine. They attribute magical properties to it, sometimes even spirits or gods, and fear offending it. Thus, this fear of the supernatural keeps the Umuofia from getting into too many wars.

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

And in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle – the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. And there were indeed occasions when the Oracle had forbidden Umuofia to wage a war. If the clan had disobeyed the Oracle they would surely have been beaten, because their dreaded *agadi-nwayi* would never fight what the Ibo call *a fight of blame*. (2.9)

THOUGHT:

The Umuofia are so superstitious that they will not make any big political moves without first consulting the gods via the Oracle. The implication is that only the gods can judge whether war is appropriate and justified.

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. (2.12)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo's fear of becoming his father overrides everything else – even fear of the gods. Does this mean that he doesn't respect the gods? Should he be more god-fearing?

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Near the barn was a small house, the “medicine house” or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm-wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children. (2.14)

#### THOUGHT:

The Igbo people pray to their gods through wooden idols of them. It’s important to note that the shrine is devoted both to a god, but also the spirits of Okonkwo’s ancestors. Family life is so important in Umuofia that ancestors take on a somewhat divine nature; they must be remembered and honored or the ancestors will bring bad fortune.

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

The story was told in Umuofia, of how his father, Unoka, had gone to consult the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves to find out way he always had a miserable harvest.

The Oracle was called Agbala, and people came from far and near to consult it. They came when misfortune dogged their steps or when they had a dispute with their neighbors. They came to discover what the future held for them or to consult the spirits of their departed fathers. (3.2-3)

#### THOUGHT:

The Oracle is widely believed to have foresight – being able to tell men about their destinies. Not only do the Igbo believe in oracles but ghosts of their “departed fathers” – who are thought to have tremendous wisdom to impart on the living.

[Go to CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

At the most one could say that his *chi* or personal god was good. But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed. (4.3)

THOUGHT:

The gods, especially one's personal god (or *chi*), are not beyond the realm of human influence. One's personal god can be affected by one's willpower, as demonstrated in Okonkwo's case. This means that a person doesn't live a life completely dictated by fate or the *chi* they were born with.

[Go to CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Ezeani]: "You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crops in the earth we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbor. We live in peace with our fellows to honor our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops would not grow. You have committed a great evil....Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your *obi* and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her...The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish...You will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries." (4.22)

THOUGHT:

The idea of personal crimes angering the earth goddess such that she doesn't bless the Umuofia land and crops is useful; in a small community, it



is a way of showing that one individual's behavior can have strong ramifications on the entire community.

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QUOTE:

And now the rains had really come, so heavy and persistent that even the village rain-maker no longer claimed to be able to intervene. He could not stop the rain now, just as he would not attempt to start it in the heart of the dry season, without serious danger to his own health. The personal dynamism required to counter the forces of these extremes of weather would be far too great for the human frame. (4.36)

THOUGHT:

The Igbo people believe that their rain-makers can actually take on god-like powers and affect the weather. Though mortals do have some ability to influence the divine, ultimately, humans risk death if they don't respect that their power is far inferior to that of the gods.

[Go to CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

The Feast of the New Yam was approaching and Umuofia was in a festival mood. It was an occasion for giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility. Ani played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed father of the clan whose bodies had been committed to the earth. (5.1)

THOUGHT:

Here we discover the name of the all-important earth goddess for the first time and see that she not only represents a gentle, nurturing, feminine

mother but also a stern judge of morality. Though she is responsible for fertility and thus new life, she also provides a connecting link between the living and the dead, making her an important mediator between generations.

[Go to CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Ezeudu]: “Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him [Ikemefuna]. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it.” (7.16)

THOUGHT:

The gods’ wills can be harsh and often baffling to mortals. Here, we also see how different the priestess Chielo – whom we learned earlier was the Oracle of the Hills and Caves – can be from her alter ego, the friendly and compassionate laywoman we met in the market. As an oracle possessed by a god, Chielo is stern and merciless.

[Go to CHAPTER 7 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

And then the *egwugwu* appeared. The women and children sent up a great shout and took to their heels. It was instinctive. A woman fled as soon as an *egwugwu* came in sight. And when, as on that day, nine of the greatest masked spirits in the clan came out together it was a terrifying spectacle...

Each of the nine *egwugwu* represented a village of the clan. Their leader was called Evil Forest. Smoke poured out of his head.

The nine villages of Umuofia had grown out of the nine sons of the first father of the clan. Evil Forest represented the village of Umueru, or the children of Eru, who was the eldest of the nine sons. (10.6-8)

#### THOUGHT:

Fear plays a big part in the religion of the Umuofia. Unlike missionaries' god who they describe in terms of a caring shepherd, the gods of the Umuofia demand respect because they are terrifying, not because they are loving.

[Go to CHAPTER 10 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwugwu* had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of *egwugwu*. But if they thought these things they kept them within themselves. The *egwugwu* with the springy walk was one of the dead fathers of the clan. He looked terrible with the smoked raffia body, a huge wooden face painted white except for the round hollow eyes and the charred teeth that were as big as a man's fingers. On his head were two powerful horns. (10.15)

#### THOUGHT:

It is implied that some people, perhaps Okonkwo's wives, have guessed the true identity of the man behind the *egwugwu* mask. Okonkwo's springy walk gives him away. Why don't those who realize that the *egwugwu* are dressed up humans say anything? Does Okonkwo believe in the gods less than other villagers because he obviously knows that the *egwugwu* are not actual spirits?

[Go to CHAPTER 10 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

“Don’t you know what kind of man Uzowulu is? He will not listen to any other decision,” replied the other. (10.52)

THOUGHT:

The *egwugwu* trials, by virtue of their divine sanction, have more authority than any judgment that men might make on each other. Divine judgment is the only way to settle disputes involving stubborn heads like Uzowulu.

[Go to CHAPTER 10 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“*Tufia-a!*” the priestess cursed, her voice cracking like the angry bark of thunder in the dry season. How dare you, woman, to go before the mighty Agbala of your own accord? Beware, woman, lest he strike you in his anger. Bring me my daughter.” (11.39)

THOUGHT:

The priestess uses godly language to subdue Ekwefi; first she yells a curse and secondly she invokes the name of the god Agbala. With divine power and entities behind her, the priestess convinces Ekwefi to back off.

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QUOTE:

From then on, Chielo never ceased in her chanting. She greeted her god in a multitude of names – the owner of the future, the messenger of earth, the god who cut a man down when his life was sweetest to him. (11.63)

THOUGHT:

Through her epithets, Chielo names multiple powers that the Igbo people believe Agbala has – foresight, power over the earth, the ability to kill. All

of these are qualities which the agricultural Umuofia people would respect, deeply desire, and even potentially fear.

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QUOTE:

But the most dreaded of all was yet to come. He was always alone and was shaped like a coffin. A sickly odor hung in the air wherever he went, and flies went with him. Even the greatest medicine men took shelter when he was near. Many years ago another *egwugwu* had dared to stand his ground before him and had been transfixed to the spot for two days. This one had only one hand and it carried a basket full of water. (13.4)

THOUGHT:

This most dreadful *egwugwu* seems to have something of a deathly aspect to him – appearing as a coffin, having a sickly decaying odor, and accompanied by flies which are harbingers of death. Apparently, he is one of the most powerful as well, having the power to strike fear into the hearts of fellow *egwugwu*.

[Go to CHAPTER 13 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

It was then that the one-handed spirit came, carrying a basket full of water. People made way for him on all sides and the noise subsided. Even the smell of gunpowder was swallowed in the sickly smell that now filled the air. He danced a few steps to the funeral drums and then went to see the corpse.

“Ezeudu!” he called in his guttural voice. “If you had been poor in your last life I would have asked you to be rich when you come again. But you were rich. If you had been a coward, I would have asked you to bring courage.

But you were a fearless warrior. If you had died young, I would have asked you to get life. But you lived long. So I shall ask you to come again the way you came before. If your death was the death of nature, go in peace. But if a man caused it, do not allow him a moment's rest." He danced a few more steps and went away. (13.10-11)

THOUGHT:

From this scene, we learn that the deathly *egwugwu* usually comes to with wisdom and helps to improve a dead person's life in his next reincarnation. Death, with the help of the divine, can be a new beginning and the opportunity for an improved life.

[Go to CHAPTER 13 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezedu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman. (13.15)

THOUGHT:

The gods are beings to be feared, respected, and appeased. Pleasing the gods is far more important than anything, even friendships.

[Go to CHAPTER 13 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

"He [the white man] was not an albino. He was quite different... And he was riding an iron horse. The first people who saw him ran away, but he

stood beckoning to them. In the end the fearless ones went near and even touched him. The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them.” Obierika again drank a little of his wine. “And so they killed the white man and tied his iron horse to their sacred tree because it looked as if it would run away to call the man’s friends.” (15.19)

#### THOUGHT:

The Igbo people rely on their oracles to advise them on what to do when faced with new, strange situations. As the Oracle has access to divine information, he offers correct but cryptic information about the threat the white man represents. Though always right, divine knowledge cannot always be correctly interpreted by humans.

[Go to CHAPTER 15 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

At this point an old man said he had a question. “Which is this god of yours,” he asked, “the goddess of the earth, the god of the sky, Amadiora or the thunderbolt, or what?”

The interpreter spoke to the white man and he immediately gave his answer. “All the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one true God and He has the earth, the sky, you and me and all of us.” (16.13-14)

#### THOUGHT:

The missionaries present the idea of a single god, and one who is not immediately relevant to their lives as agriculturalists. The gods of the Igbo represent important aspects of their lives such as the earth in which they grow their food, and the sky which is the source of sun and water needed for their crops.

[Go to CHAPTER 16 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

It was well known among the people of Mbanta that their gods and ancestors were sometimes long-suffering and would deliberately allow a man to go on defying them. But even in such cases they set their limit at seven market weeks or twenty-eight days. Beyond that limit no man was suffered to go. And so excitement mounted in the village as the seventh week approached since the impudent missionaries built their church in the Evil Forest. The villagers were so certain about the doom that awaited these men that one or two converts thought it wise to suspend their allegiance to the new faith.

At last the day came by which all the missionaries should have died. But they were still alive, building a new red-earth and thatch house for their teacher, Mr. Kiaga. That week they won a handful more converts. And for the first time they had a woman. Her name was Nneka, the wife of Amadi, who was a prosperous farmer. She was very heavy with child. (17.11-12)

THOUGHT:

The Igbo people's superstition that no man may trespass upon the gods after twenty-eight days backfires. Nothing happens to the missionaries living in the Evil Forest, so instead of questioning the veracity of their own faith, they chalk it up to the unprecedented power of the missionaries' Christianity. Consequently, the Christians win more converts.

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QUOTE:

"It is not our custom to fight for our gods," said one of them. "Let us not presume to do so now. If a man kills the sacred python in the secrecy of his hut, the matter lies between him and the god. We did not see it. If we put



ourselves between the god and his victim we may receive blows intended for the offender. When a man blasphemes, what do we do? Do we go and stop his mouth? No. We put our fingers into our ears to stop us hearing. That is a wise action.” (18.21)

#### THOUGHT:

The Igbo believe that their gods are perfectly capable and vengeful gods. Because they also cannot understand the divine completely, they stay out of the way of the gods, for fear of making a mistake. Essentially the villagers do not assume that they know the will of the gods.

[Go to CHAPTER 18 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

“They say that Okoli killed the sacred python,” said one man.

“It is false,” said another. “Okoli told me himself that it was false.”

Okoli was not there to answer. He had fallen ill on the previous night. Before the day was over he was dead. His death showed that the gods were still able to fight their own battles. The clan saw no reason then for molesting the Christians. (18.35-37)

#### THOUGHT:

The Igbo people take Okoli’s sudden death to be the vengeful workings of an offended god. To them, Okoli’s death is a sign that their gods can still act. Are the villagers justified in thinking Okoli’s death is a divine sign, or are they just looking for an excuse not to engage in battle against the missionaries?

[Go to CHAPTER 18 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Whenever Mr. Brown went to that village he spent long hours with Akunna in his *obi* talking through an interpreter about religion. Either of them succeeded in converting the other but they learned more about their different beliefs.

“You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth,” said Akunna on one of Mr. Brown’s visits. “We also believe in Him and call Him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods.”

“There are no other gods,” said Mr. Brown. “Chukwu is the only God and all the others are false. You carve a piece of wood – like that one” (he pointed at the rafters from which Akunna’s carved *Ikenga* hung) “and you call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood.”

“Yes,” said Akunna. “It is indeed a piece of wood. The tree from which it came was made by Chukwu, as indeed all minor gods were. But He made them for His messengers so that we could approach Him through them. It is like yourself. You are the head of your church.”

“No,” protested Mr. Brown. “The head of my church is God Himself.”

“I know,” said Akunna, “but there must be a head in this world among men. Somebody like yourself must be the head here.”

“The head of my church in that sense is in England.”

“That is exactly what I am saying. The head of your country is in your country. He has sent you here as his messenger. And you have also appointed your own messengers and servants. Or let me take another example, the District Commissioner. He is sent by your king.”

“They have a queen,” said the interpreter on his own account.

“Your queen sends her messenger, the District Commissioner. He finds that he cannot do the work alone and so he appoints *kotma* to help him. It is the

same with God, or Chukwu. He appoints the smaller gods to help Him because His work is too great for one person.”

“You should not think of Him as a person,” said Mr. Brown. “It is because you do so that you imagine He must need helps. And the worst thing about it is that you give all the worship to the false gods you have created.”

“That is not so. We make sacrifices to the little gods, but when they fail and there is no one else to turn to we go to Chukwu. It is right to do so. We approach a great man through his servants. But when his servants fail to help us, then we go to the last source of hope. We appear to pay greater attention to the little gods but that is not so. We worry them more because we are afraid to worry their Master. Our fathers knew that Chukwu was the Overlord and that is why many of them gave their children the name Chukwuka – ‘Chukwu is Supreme.’”

“You said one interesting thing,” said Mr. Brown. “You are afraid of Chukwu. In my religion Chukwu is a loving Father and need not be feared by those who do His will.”

“But we must fear Him when we are not doing His will,” said Akunna. “And who is to tell His will? It is too great to be known.” (21.5-18)

#### THOUGHT:

This dialogue between spokesmen of two different belief systems proves very telling. We find that the Igbo hierarchy of gods is not so different from the ecclesiastical system of Christianity. Both belief systems have a supreme god to whom all prayers ultimately go.

[Go to CHAPTER 21 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

One of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an *egwugwu* in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige

in the eyes of the uninitiated. And this was what Enoch did.

The annual worship of the earth goddess fell on a Sunday, and the masked spirits were abroad. The Christian women who had been to church could not therefore go home. Some of their men had gone out to beg the *egwugwu* to retire for a short while for the women to pass. They agreed and were already retiring, when Enoch boasted aloud that they would not dare to touch a Christian. Whereupon they all came back and one of them gave Enoch a good stroke of the cane, which was always carried. Enoch fell on him and tore off his mask. The other *egwugwu* immediately surrounded their desecrated companion, to shield him from the profane gaze of women and children, and led them away. Enoch had killed an ancestral spirit, and Umuofia was thrown into confusion. (22.9-10)

THOUGHT:

Unmasking an *egwugwu* spirit in public is akin to murder because it reduces the god to mortality.

[Go to CHAPTER 22 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[After the unmasking of the *egwugwu*]: That night the Mother of the Spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night. Not even the oldest man in Umuofia had ever heard such a strange and fearful sound, and it was never to be heard again. It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming – its own death. (22.10)

THOUGHT:

To mourn the death of her son, the Mother of the Spirits laments loudly and strikes fear into the hearts of the Umuofia. The ancestral spirits are closely tied to humans and the land they live on. Thus, it seems the murder of one

ancestral spirit portends the coming death of his people and the desecration of his land.

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## Theme and Quote Analysis on: Sin

### Theme Summary

In *Things Fall Apart*, sin is defined as a crime against the gods. Such transgressions occur when a member of society violates the most intimate bonds of family, especially with regards to one's children or somehow insults an ancestral spirit. These sins call for quick and severe punishment, often including animal sacrifices, a heavy fine, various symbolic gestures of atonement, exile from one's fatherland, or even death. Only when such payment is given can justice be served. If punishment is not doled out, not only is the sinner subject to divine wrath, but the entire community suffers.

### Study Questions

1. How is crime distinguished from sin? How are the two accordingly punished? Hint: consider the *egwugwu* trials.
2. Do Umuofia punishments fit the crimes? Do they seem arbitrary?
3. Why is offending the earth goddess such an enormous sin? What assumptions can we make about the role the earth goddess plays in Igbo society?
4. In comparison to Igbo law, how does the white man's justice system work? Are the same behaviors considered sins in both cultures? How and why do the punishments for the same crimes differ?
5. Does Okonkwo sin when he aids in the murder of Ikemefuna?

### Sample Thesis Statements

Okonkwo sins when he murders Ikemefuna. The troubles that follow Okonkwo after the murder are a result of Okonkwo's sin going unpunished.

### **Quotes & Thoughts on Sin**

#### QUOTE:

He [Unoka] died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess. When a man was afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die. There was the story of a very stubborn man who staggered back to his house and had to be carried again to the forest and tied to a tree. The sickness was an abomination to the earth, and so the victim could not be buried in her bowels. He died and rotted away above the earth, and was not given the first of the second burial. Such was Unoka's fate. (3.8)

#### THOUGHT:

The lazy Unoka dies of some kind of abominable illness. His death seems to be a sort of divine justice, paying him back for sinning against his family by not providing for them.

[Go to CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

He walked back to his *obi* to await Ojiugo's return. And when she returned he beat her very heavily. In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess. (4.17)

#### THOUGHT:

Okonkwo commits a sin against the earth goddess by beating his wife during the Week of Peace. This is an example of a sin that seems pretty arbitrary. We think it's bad to beat your wife at all, but apparently the earth goddess thinks domestic abuse is OK long as it isn't during Peace Week. Regardless, what seems worse than inadvertently committing violence during a period of peace is that Okonkwo deliberately continues to sin even when he realizes his transgression. He seems to lack fear and respect for the goddess.

[Go to CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Ezeani]: "Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors. (4.20)

THOUGHT:

The priest of the earth goddess, Ezeani, doesn't just condemn Okonkwo because it was uncool of Okonkwo to sin against the earth goddess (by beating his wife during Peace Week). The people of Umuofia believe that when one man commits a sin against the goddess, she will punish the entire village, not just the offender, unless the sin is atoned for. Thus the people of Umuofia live an interdependent lifestyle with each man's behavior having consequences on the rest of the clan.

[Go to CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Ezeani]: "We live in peace with our fellows to honor our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops would not grow. You have committed a great evil [...] Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your obi and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her... The evil you have done can ruin the



whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish.” His tone now changed from anger to command. “You will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries.” (4.22)

#### THOUGHT:

Ezeani pronounces Okonkwo’s beating of his wife a sin against the goddess and warns that his sin could have drastic consequences, ones that affect the whole clan. He sets Okonkwo’s punishment at an animal sacrifice and payment. The punishment seems strangely small in comparison to the possible consequences of the crime. Overall, it seems that gods require sinners to acknowledge their wrongs.

[Go to CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

[Obierika]: “And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you I would have stayed home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families.” (8.26)

#### THOUGHT:

Killing family members and killing clansmen are both considered sins against the earth goddess. However, Ikemefuna was neither Okonkwo’s son by blood nor was he a member of the Umuofia clan. As a result, the community doesn’t force punishment on Okonkwo. However, Obierika, who tends to be wise, thinks that Ikemefuna was Okonkwo’s son – Okonkwo treated the boy like a son, and Ikemefuna thought of Okonkwo as his father. Obierika believes that the earth goddess will agree. Is Okonkwo’s subsequently poor luck all because of he doesn’t atone for the sin of killing Ikemefuna?

[Go to CHAPTER 8 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

The medicine man then ordered that there should be no mourning for the dead child. He brought out a sharp razor from the goatskin bag slung from his left shoulder and began to mutilate the child. Then he took it away to bury in the Evil Forest, holding it by the ankle and dragging it on the ground behind him. After such treatment it would think twice before coming again, unless it was one of the stubborn ones who returned, carrying the stamp of their mutilation – a missing finger or perhaps a dark line where the medicine man’s razor had cut them. (9.23)

#### THOUGHT:

Unlike in normal circumstances, here it is a sin for a child to be born because that child is a demonic spirit posing as an innocent human baby. Thus, what seems like a sinful ritual – mutilating the corpses of babies – is actually used to prevent further sins in the rebirth of evil.

[Go to CHAPTER 9 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

[In Ekwefi’s story] “The birds gathered round to eat what was left and to peck at the bones he had thrown all about the floor. Some of them were too angry to eat. They chose to fly home on an empty stomach. But before they left each took back the feather he had lent to Tortoise. And there he stood in his hard shell full of food and wine but without any wings to fly home. He asked the birds to take a message for his wife, but they all refused. In the end Parrot, who had felt more angry than the others; suddenly changed his mind and agreed to take the message.

‘Tell my wife,’ said Tortoise, ‘to bring out all the soft things in my house and cover and compound with them so that I can jump down from the sky without very great danger.’

Parrot promised to deliver the message, and then flew away. But when he

reached Tortoise's house he told his wife to bring out all the hard things in the house. And so she brought out her husband's hoes, machetes, spears, guns and even his cannon. Tortoise looked down from the sky and saw his wife bringing things out, but it was too far to see what they were. When all seemed ready he let himself go. He fell and fell and fell until he began to fear that he would never stop falling. And then like the sound of his cannon he crashed on the compound."

"Did he die?" asked Ezinma.

"No," replied Ekwefi. "His shell broke into pieces. But there was a great medicine man in the neighborhood. Tortoise's wife sent for him and he gathered all the bits of shell and stuck them together. That is why Tortoise's shell is not smooth." (11.20-24)

#### THOUGHT:

The laws of the earth goddess are illustrated even in folktales. Here, Tortoise has sinned by not allowing his fellow creatures to partake of the food that the earth offered for all her children. As punishment, one of his brothers turns against him and the earth herself breaks his shell.

[Go to CHAPTER 11 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

And then from the center of the delirious fury came a cry of agony and shouts of horror. It was as if a spell had been cast. All was silent. In the center of the crowd a boy lay in a pool of blood. It was the dead man's sixteen-year-old-son, who with his brothers and half-brothers had been dancing the traditional farewell to their father. Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart.

The confusion that followed was without parallel in the tradition of Umuofia. Violent deaths were frequent, but nothing like this had ever happened.

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years...

As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezedu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman. (13.12-15)

#### THOUGHT:

It is a sin against the earth to kill a clansman, a member of one's extended family. Thus, Okonkwo must atone for his sin, or bring the wrath of the goddess down on the entire clan. The danger is so great to the whole village, and many of the village men band together to join in cleansing the earth and appeasing the goddess.

[Go to CHAPTER 13 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

[Obierika on Okonkwo's exile]: Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offense on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offense against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender. (13.16)

#### THOUGHT:

Obierika is torn about the consequences of so-called sins. He wonders why intention is never taken into account. Punishment seems to come whether or not a forbidden act was premeditated. Do you think that Okonkwo should be punished for accidentally killing the boy at the funeral? Is this just karmic payback for sinning by killing Ikemefuna?

[Go to CHAPTER 13 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

[Uchendu]: “A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme. Is it right that you, Okonkwo, should bring to your mother a heavy face and refuse to be comforted? Be careful or you may displease the dead. Your duty is to comfort your wives and children and take them back to your fatherland after seven years. But if you allow sorrow to weigh you down and kill you, they will all die in exile.” (14.32)

#### THOUGHT:

In Okonkwo’s culture, disrespecting your family is a sin. According to Uchendu, Okonkwo is committing a sin by despairing while in exile here in his motherland. Not only is he dishonoring his mother who raised and nurtured him, but he disrespects his wives and children by not setting a positive example for them in exile. If he doesn’t shape up, he’s not the only one who will suffer the consequences, his family will too. Again we see that sin is a community affair and not just the private business of a single individual.

[Go to CHAPTER 14 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Now that he had time to think of it, his son's crime stood out in its stark enormity. To abandon the gods of one's father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors. Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. (17.25)

#### THOUGHT:

Okonkwo considers his son's betrayal as evil and a sin. Is Nwoye's behavior a sin, though, or is it another way that the goddess or karma is punishing Okonkwo for killing Ikemefuna?

[Go to CHAPTER 17 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

It was in fact one of them [a former osu] who in his zeal brought the church into serious conflict with the clan a year later by killing the sacred python, the emanation of the god of water.

The royal python was the most revered animal in Mbanta and all the surrounding clans. It was addressed as "Our Father," and was allowed to go wherever it chose, even into people's beds. It ate rats in the house and sometimes swallowed hens' eggs. If a clansman killed a royal python accidentally, he made sacrifices of atonement and performed an expensive burial ceremony such as was done for a great man. No punishment was prescribed for a man who killed the python knowingly. Nobody thought that such a thing could ever happen. (18.16-17)

#### THOUGHT:

The killing of the sacred python is obviously a sin since that particular snake is the physical manifestation of a god. However, the very thought of

killing it intentionally is so unthinkable that the Mbanta are reluctant to admit it might have happened.

[Go to CHAPTER 18 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

One of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an *egwugwu* in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated. And this was what Enoch did.

The annual worship of the earth goddess fell on a Sunday, and the masked spirits were abroad. The Christian women who had been to church could not therefore go home. Some of their men had gone out to beg the *egwugwu* to retire for a short while for the women to pass. They agreed and were already retiring, when Enoch boasted aloud that they would not dare to touch a Christian. Whereupon they all came back and one of them gave Enoch a good stroke of the cane, which was always carried. Enoch fell on him and tore off his mask. The other *egwugwu* immediately surrounded their desecrated companion, to shield him from the profane gaze of women and children, and led them away. Enoch had killed an ancestral spirit, and Umuofia was thrown into confusion. (22.9-10)

THOUGHT:

By unmasking the *egwugwu*, Enoch has committed a sin, especially since he baited the *egwugwu* into striking him. The action of unmasking is, in effect, killing the spirit because once revealed as a human body, he is made mortal. Many of the sins in Umuofia relate to killing family members. Here, Enoch, in a sense, has killed a family member because the *egwugwu* are ancestral spirits.

[Go to CHAPTER 22 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Obierika on Okonkwo's corpse]: "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers." (25.15)

THOUGHT:

Suicide can be seen as a crime against the earth because the goddess provides people with life, therefore spilling your own blood is disrespecting the gift of life that the earth goddess granted.

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## **Theme and Quote Analysis on: Traditions and Customs**

### **Theme Summary**

Igbo lifestyle is highly stylized, from its ritual speech to the actions performed for certain ceremonies. Most of these formalized interactions occur in an attempt to show respect to some external being – another man, an ancestral spirit, or a god. Respect and knowledge of one's role in society is very important in determining such customs. Another institution that rituals address and honor is the family unit. Stylized language, in particular, seeks to hold the family together by means of promises.

### **Study Questions**

1. In such ritualized events as weddings and funerals, what aspects of life do the Igbo people celebrate or mourn?
2. Much of Igbo culture includes highly stylized speech. What purpose does the formal way of speaking serve? To another man? To an audience? To a family member? To the gods?
3. Is the younger generation of Umuofia straying away from long-established customs? What impact does the arrival of the Christians have?
4. Can the Umuofia be a unified group of people without shared traditions?

### **Sample Thesis Statements**

The traditions of the Umuofia are used to show respect to either the family unit or the gods.

The coming of the Christians is the sole cause of the breakdown of Umuofia traditions and customs.

### **Quotes & Thoughts on Traditions and Customs**

#### **QUOTE:**

One day a neighbor called Okoye came in to see him...He immediately rose and shook hands with Okoye, who then unrolled the goatskin which he carried under his arm, and sat down. Unoka went into an inner room and soon returned with a small wooden disc containing a kola nut, some alligator pepper and a lump of white chalk.

“I have kola,” he announced when he sat down, and passed the disc over to his guest.

“Thank you. He who brings kola brings life. But I think you ought to break it,” replied Okoye, passing back the disc.

“No, it is for you, I think,” and they argued like this for a few moments before Unoka accepted the honor of breaking the kola. Okoye, meanwhile, took the lump of chalk, drew some lines on the floor, and then painted his big toe.

As he broke the kola, Unoka prayed to their ancestors for life and health, and for protection against their enemies. When they had eaten they talked about many things: about the heavy rains which were drowning the yams, about the next ancestral feast and about the impending war with the village of Mbaino. (1.7-10)

#### **THOUGHT:**

There is a great deal of tradition surrounding the kola nut. It seems to be a key aspect of being a welcoming host. The kola nut tradition is yet another way of communicating respect.

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QUOTE:

Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten. Okoye was a great talker and he spoke for a long time, skirting round the subject and then hitting it finally. (1.14)

THOUGHT:

One custom used to show politeness and sophistication is to talk learnedly in pithy proverbs and to approach one's intended topic only slowly and discreetly.

[Go to CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Okonkwo had just blown out the palm-oil lamp and stretched himself on his bamboo bed when he heard the *ogene* of the town crier piercing the still night air. *Gome, gome gome, gome*, boomed the hollow metal. Then the crier gave his message, and at the end of it beat his instrument again. (2.1)

THOUGHT:

From Okonkwo's unalarmed reaction, we can assume that the *ogene* drum is used regularly to convey messages from distant villages. This tradition gives the messages a sort of exotic and mysterious quality, as well as simultaneously letting the whole village know that there is news.

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“Every year,” he [Unoka] said sadly, “before I put any crop in the earth, I sacrifice a cock to Ani, the owner of all land. It is the law of our fathers. I also kill a cock at the shrine of Ifejioku, the god of yams. I clear the bush and set fire to it when it is dry. I sow the yams when the first rain has fallen, and stake them when the young tendrils appear...” (3.6)

THOUGHT:

It is customary to make animal sacrifices to the earth goddess when planting crops. Yet again, ritual is used to communicate respect, in this case to the earth goddess who has control over the success of the yams.

[Go to CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

He [Okonkwo] took a pot of palm-wine and a cock to Nwakibie...He presented a kola nut and an alligator pepper, which were passed round for all to see and then returned to him. He broke the nut saying: “We shall all live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break.”

After the kola nut had been eaten Okonkwo brought his palm-wine from the corner of the hut where it had been placed and stood it in the center of the group. He addressed Nwakibie, calling him “Our father.”

“*Nna ayi*,” he said. “I have brought you this little kola. As our people say, a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness. I have come to pay you my respects and also to ask a favor. But let us drink the wine first.” (3.11-13)

THOUGHT:

As a guest, Okonkwo owes traditional gifts and respectful sayings to his host. He goes through all the proper motions to make himself a respectable guest – offering the kola nut, praying for the health of the host’s family, calling him “our father,” and declining to talk business until everyone has eaten their fill.

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QUOTE:

[Ogbuefi Ezeudu]: “They have that custom in Obodoani. If a man dies at this time he is not buried but cast into the Evil Forest...They throw away large numbers of men and women without burial. (4.28)

THOUGHT:

The Obodoani have a tradition that if a man dies during the Week of Peace, he cannot be buried, but only cast unceremoniously into the woods. It is as if death is a form of violence rather than a natural part of life.

[Go to CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

And so nature was not interfered with in the middle of the rainy season. Sometimes it poured down in such thick sheets of water that earth and sky seemed merged in one gray wetness...At such times, in each of the countless thatched huts of Umuofia, children sat around their mother’s cooking fire telling stories, or with their father in his *obi* warming themselves from a log fire, roasting and eating maize. It was a brief resting period between the exacting and arduous planting season and the equally exacting but light-hearted month of harvests. (4.37)

THOUGHT:

During the rainy season, it is customary for children to sit inside the huts with their parents and tell stories or eat snacks. This lovely tradition gives them time to rest and recover after the grueling planting season.

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#### QUOTE:

The Feast of the New Yam was approaching and Umuofia was in a festival mood. It was an occasion for giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility. Ani played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed father of the clan whose bodies had been committed to the earth.

The Feast of the New Yam was held every year before the harvest began, to honor the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan. New yams could not be eaten until some had first been offered to these powers. Men and women, young and old, looked forward to the New Yam Festival because it began the season of plenty – the new year. On the last night before the festival, yams of the old year were all disposed of by those who still had them. The new year must begin with tasty, fresh yams and not the shriveled and fibrous crop of the previous year. All cooking pots, calabashes and wooden bowls were thoroughly washed, especially the wooden mortar in which yam was pounded. Yam foo-foo and vegetable soup was the chief food in the celebration. So much was cooked that, no matter how heavily the family ate or how many friends and relatives they invited from neighboring villages, there was always a large quantity of food left over at the end of the day. (5.1-2)

#### THOUGHT:

It makes sense that the festival of the new year is named after the life-giving crop that sustains the clan: the yam. The Igbo show the symbolic rebirth of the year by throwing out old food, washing everything so they may be clean and pure for the coming year, and celebrating with fresh new

yams. They join together with their families and community to celebrate the coming of another year that they will share.

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QUOTE:

Obierika then presented to him a small bundle of short broomsticks. Ukegbu counted them.

“They are thirty?” he asked.

Obierika nodded in agreement.

“We are at last getting somewhere,” Ukegbu said, and then turning to his brother and his song he said: ‘Let us go out and whisper together.’ The three rose and went outside. When they returned Ukegbu handed the bundle of sticks back to Obierika. He counted them; instead of thirty there were only fifteen. He passed them over to his eldest brother, Machi, who also counted them and said:

“We had not thought to go below thirty. But as the dog said, ‘If I fall down for you and you fall down for me, it is play’. Marriage should be a play and not a fight; so we are falling down again.” He then added ten sticks to the fifteen and gave the bundle to Ukegbu.

In this way Akueke’s bride-price was finally settled at twenty bags of cowries. (8.76-81)

THOUGHT:

The Umuofia follow a traditional ritual to determine a bride-price; the bride’s family presents the groom’s family with a sum (represented by broomsticks) and the other party adds or subtracts sticks as they see fit. They exchange the bundle of broomsticks several times, until the two groups finally agree. That final number of broomsticks corresponds to the

number of bags of cowries paid by the groom's family for the bride's hand in marriage. After Akueke's bride-price is settled on some of the men discuss how the Umuofia way of coming to a bride price is really quite civilized. Overall, this silent form of back-and-forth to reach an agreement is more respectful of women than just verbal haggling, which is how men agree on prices for livestock. Thus, the custom of settling a bride-price is intended to be respectful.

[Go to CHAPTER 8 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“It was only this morning,” said Obierika, “that Okonkwo and I were talking about Abame and Aninta, where titled men climb trees and pound foo-foo for their wives.”

“All their customs are upside-down. They do not decide bride-price as we do, with sticks. They haggle and bargain as if they were buying a goat or a cow in the market.”

“That is very bad,” said Obierika's eldest brother. “But what is good in one place is bad in another place. In Umunso they do not bargain at all, not even with broomsticks. The suitor just goes on bringing bags of cowries until his in-laws tell him to stop. It is a bad custom because it always lead to a quarrel.”

“The world is large,” said Okonkwo. “I have even heard that in some tribes a man's children belong to his wife and her family.”

“That cannot be,” said Machi. “You might as well say that the woman lies on top of the man when they are making the children.” (8.84-88)

THOUGHT:

The Umuofia men criticize other tribes' customs as unsophisticated or “upside-down.” Like many people, the Umuofia think their ways are the



best and others are ignorant.

[Go to CHAPTER 8 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

It is customary to understand the phrase “after the midday meal” as really “in the evening, when the sun’s heat has softened.” Only a member of the Igbo would understand this discrepancy between word and meaning.

“Uzowulu’s body, I salute you,” he said. Spirits always addressed humans as “bodies.” (10.17)

THOUGHT:

Because it is customary to believe the *egwugwu* are godly – more spiritual and less fleshly than men – it makes sense for the *egwugwu* to address humans as “bodies,” mere vessels for the all-important spirit.

[Go to CHAPTER 10 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“I hope our in-laws will bring many pots of wine. Although they come from a village that is known for being closefisted, they ought to know that Akueke is the bride for a king.”

“They dare not bring fewer than thirty pots,” said Okonkwo. ‘I shall tell them my mind of they do.’...

Very soon after, the in-laws began to arrive. Young men and boys in single file, each carrying a pot of wine, came first. Obierika’s relatives counted the pots as they came. Twenty, twenty-five. There was a long break, and the hosts looked at each other as if to say, “I told you.” Then more pots came.

Thirty, thirty-five, forty, forty-five. The hosts nodded in approval and seemed to say, “Now they are behaving like men.”

THOUGHT:

This marriage ritual shows that it is customary for the bride-price to be paid in pots of palm-wine. Providing many pots of wine is a show of respect, and the greater the number of pots, the more highly the groom’s family values the bride.

[Go to CHAPTER 10 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Ezeudu was a great man, and so all the clan was at his funeral. The ancient drums of death beat, guns and cannon were fired, and the men dashed about in frenzy, cutting down every tree or animal they saw, jumping over walls and dancing on the roof. It was a warrior’s funeral, and from morning till night warriors came and went in their age groups. They all wore smoked raffia skirts and their bodies were painted with chalk and charcoal. Now and again an ancestral spirit or *egwugwu* appeared from the underworld, speaking in a tremulous, unearthly voice and completely covered in raffia. (13.3)

THOUGHT:

Funerals for celebrated men of title include elaborate, formalized ceremony – the saluting fire of guns and cannons, militaristic drums, and frenzied mourning – as a show of respect for the deceased. Even the godly *egwugwu* pay a visit to honor the man.

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QUOTE:

They sat in a big circle on the ground and the bride sat in the center with a hen in her right hand. Uchendu sat by her, holding the ancestral staff of the family. All the other men stood outside the circle, watching. Their wives watched also. It was evening and the sun was setting.

Uchendu's eldest daughter, Njide, asked the questions.

“Remember that if you do not answer truthfully you will suffer or even die at childbirth, she began. How many men have lain with you since my brother first expressed the desire to marry you?”

“None,” she answered simply.

“Answer truthfully,” urged the other women.

“None?” asked Njide.

“None,” she answered.

“Swear on this staff of my fathers,” said Uchendu.

“I swear,” said the bride.

Uchendu took the hen from her, slit its throat with a sharp knife and allowed some of the blood to fall on his ancestral staff.

From that day Anikwu took the young bride to his hut and she became his wife. The daughters of the family did not return to their homes immediately but spent two or three days with their kinsmen. (14.12-22)

#### THOUGHT:

The public confession ceremony for the bride shows how deeply the Umuofia value truth and purity in its women. The implication here is that Anikwu would not value his wife as much had she not been virgin upon their marriage. The sacrifice of a hen somehow seems to seal the bride's words as a vow and consecrate the marriage.

[Go to CHAPTER 14 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

He [an *osu*] was a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart – a taboo forever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the free-born. He was in fact an outcast, living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste – long, tangled and dirty hair. A razor was taboo to him. An *osu* could not attend an assembly of the free-born, and they, in turn, could not shelter under his roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest. How could such a man be a follower of Christ? (18.12)

THOUGHT:

Here, we get a traditional description of an *osu* – an outcast whose very existence offends the villagers. The *osu* by custom must wear a mark of their lowly status – long, tangled hair – in order to distinguish them from the community at large. This one marker is all that really sets them apart. The arrival of the Christians, however, throws the social order out of whack by insisting that the *osu* can free themselves from being outcasts by joining the new religion and shaving their hair.

[Go to CHAPTER 18 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“But I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter’s dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. I fear for you; I fear for you the clan.” (19.24)

#### THOUGHT:

One of the deepest values of the Umuofia is family and unity within the community. Recently, the younger generation has ignored or depreciated those bonds of kinship. The older generation blames the loss of traditional values for the takeover of the missionaries. They see salvation only in reverting back to the old ways.

[Go to CHAPTER 19 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

[Obierika]: “Does the white man understand our custom about land?”

[Okonkwo]: “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 bad.” (20.25-26)

#### THOUGHT:

The people who convert to Christianity suddenly have a change of heart on all the customs that they have grown up following. Everything related to the old ways of the Umuofia suddenly seem “bad” to them.

[Go to CHAPTER 20 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

It was the time of the full moon. But that night the voice of children was not heard. The village *ilo* where they always gathered for a moon-play was empty. The women of Iguedo did not meet in their secret enclosure to learn a new dance to be displayed later to the village. Young men who were always abroad in the moonlight kept their huts that night. Their manly voices were not heard on the village paths as they went to visit their friends

and lovers. Umuofia was like a startled animal with ears erect, sniffing the silent, ominous air and not knowing which way to run. (23.25)

#### THOUGHT:

The capture and ransom of Umuofia's leaders disrupts the fabric of life so much that the villagers do not continue their customary nightly activities. They stay in their huts, immobilized by fear and confusion. Such an offense has never been committed against their leaders and the villagers don't know how to react.

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#### QUOTE:

*“Umuofia kwenu!”* he bellowed, raising his left arm and pushing the air with his open hand.

*“Yaa!”* roared Umuofia.

*“Umuofia kwenu!”* he bellowed again, and again and again, facing a new direction each time. And the crowd answer, *“Yaa!”*

There was immediate silence as though cold water had been poured on a roaring flame.

Okika sprang to his feet and also saluted his clansmen four times. Then he began to speak:

“You all know why we are here, when we ought to be building our barns or mending our huts, when we should be putting our compounds in order. My father used to say to me: ‘Whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something is after its life.’ When I saw you all pouring into this meeting from all the quarters of our clan so early in the morning, I knew that something was after our life.

All our gods are weeping. Idemili is weeping. Ogwugwu is weeping, Agbala is weeping, and all the others. Our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes.”

This is a great gathering. No clan can boast of greater numbers of greater valor. But are we all here? I ask you: Are all the sons of Umuofia with us here?” A deep murmur swept through the crowd.

“They are not,” he said. “They have broken the clan and gone their several ways. We who are here this morning have remained true to our fathers, but our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland. If we fight the stranger we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamed of such a thing, they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to them. So we must do what our fathers would never have done.” (24.25-33)

#### THOUGHT:

This scene combines traditional Umuofia ceremony with a totally original resolution. The speaker welcomes his fellow villagers with the traditional Umuofia greeting and praising of Umuofia’s valor. However, the purpose of the gathering is revolutionary – to declare war on their brothers. This type of behavior is unprecedented in Igbo history because villages have always been united. Such a dramatic break from tradition reveals how deeply the presence of the missionaries has affected the local culture.

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# **Theme and Quote Analysis on: Man and the Natural World**

## **Theme Summary**

As an agricultural society, the survival of the Umuofia depends on the earth and its predictable cycle of seasons. Thus we see frequent worship of the earth and her bounty, especially at the new year and during harvest season. The Igbo also reap the earth's wealth in rather economical and effective ways – tapping trees for palm-wine, capitalizing off of locust plagues, and making medicine with herbs. Human beings are implicitly viewed as the children of the earth, though the conduct of the white men throws doubt on that assumption. In addition to being generous, the earth can also be deadly and is ruthless and not provide food and resources if offended in some way by human actions.

## **Study Questions**

1. In terms of gender, how is the earth represented? Which of the earth's qualities support this gender characterization?
2. What role do folktales play in explaining natural phenomenon? How do they characterize animals?
3. Are Umuofia people depicted as a harmonious part of nature or a disruption of it? How? And what about the white man?
4. What emotions do the Umuofia feel toward the earth?

## **Sample Thesis Statements**

The Umuofia live in fear and reverence of the natural world.



The Umuofia see themselves as a part of the natural world.

## **Quotes & Thoughts on Man and the Natural World**

### QUOTE:

During the planting season Okonkwo worked daily on his farms from cock-crow until the chickens went to roost. (2.13)

### THOUGHT:

Okonkwo's hard labor out in the fields suggests the Umuofia survive by agriculture. They depend on the generosity of the earth for their survival.

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

### QUOTE:

The year that Okonkwo took eight hundred seed-yams from Nwakibie was the worst year in living memory. Nothing happened at its proper time; it was either too early or too late. It seemed as if the world had gone mad. The first rains were late, and, when they came, lasted only a brief moment. The blazing sun returned, more fierce than it had ever been known, and scorched all the green that had appeared with the rains. The earth burned like hot coals and roasted all the yams that had been sown. Like all good farmers, Okonkwo had begun to sow with the first rains. He had sown four hundred seeds when the rains dried up and the heat returned. He watched the sky all day for signs of rain clouds and lay awake all night. In the morning he went back to his farm and saw the withering tendrils. He had tried to protect them from the smoldering earth by making rings of thick sisal leaves around them. But by the end of the day the sisal rings were burned dry and gray. He changed them every day, and prayed that the rain might fall in the night. But the drought continued for eight market weeks and the yams were killed...

Okonkwo planted what was left of his seed-yams when the rains finally returned. He had one consolation. The yams he had sown before the drought were his own, the harvest of the previous. He still had the eight hundred from Nwakibie and the four hundred from his father's friend. So he would make a fresh start.

But the year had gone mad. Rain fell as it had never fallen before. For days and nights together it poured down in violent torrents, and washed away the yam heaps. Trees were uprooted and deep gorges appeared everywhere. Then the rain became less violent. But it went from day to day without a pause. The spell of sunshine which always came in the middle of the wet season did not appear. The yams put on luxuriant green leaves, but every farmer knew that without sunshine the tubers would not grow.

That year the harvest was sad, like a funeral, and many farmers wept as they dug up the miserable and rotting yams. One man tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself. (3.29-33)

#### THOUGHT:

Okonkwo's destiny, and indeed the future of the people of Umuofia, is decided by the vicissitudes of nature. Their crops depend on the rain and sun for survival. The fact that drought, and then flooding, kills the yam crop means a year of going hungry and maybe starvation.

[Go to CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, who was two years younger, because quite inseparable from him [Ikemefuna] because he seemed to know everything. He could fashion out flutes from bamboo stems and even from the elephant grass. He knew the names of all the birds and could set clever traps for the little bush rodents. And he knew which tress made the strongest bows. (4.6)

#### THOUGHT:

Ikemefuna is familiar with all the blessings of the earth, knowledgeable about how to make delightful crafts from all sorts of raw foliage and also how to find food in the wild. By tying Ikemefuna to the earth, Achebe clearly depicts Okonkwo's murder of Ikemefuna as a direct crime against the earth.

[Go to CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Yam, the king of crops, was a very exacting king. For three or four moons it demanded hard work and constant attention from cock-crow till the chickens went back to roost. The young tendrils were protected from earth-heat with rings of sisal leaves. As the rains became heavier the women planted maize, melons and beans between yam mounds. The yams were then staked, first with little sticks and later with tall and big tree branches. The women weeded the farm three times at definite periods in the life of the yams, neither early nor late.

And now the rains had really come, so heavy and persistent that even the village rain-maker no longer claimed to be able to intervene. He could not stop the rain now, just as he would not attempt to start it in the heart of the dry season, without serious danger to his own health. The personal dynamism required to counter the forces of these extremes of weather would be far too great for the human frame.

And so nature was not interfered with in the middle of the rainy season. Sometimes it poured down in such thick sheets of water that earth and sky seemed merged in one gray wetness. It was then uncertain whether the low rumbling of Amadiora's thunder came from above or below. At such times, in each of the countless thatched huts of Umuofia, children sat around their mother's cooking fire telling stories, or with their father in his *obi* warming themselves from a log fire, roasting and eating maize. It was a brief resting period between the exacting and arduous planting season and the equally exacting but light-hearted month of harvests. (4.35-37)

#### THOUGHT:

Yams require a good deal of attention to grow successfully. But the planting season is not all hard work and no play; the advent of the rainy season brings lots of eating, storytelling, and enjoyment of family company indoors. Rain is so crucial to their survival that the Umuofia associate it with the godly world.

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#### QUOTE:

For three years Ikemefuna lived in Okonkwo's household and the elders of Umuofia seemed to have forgotten about him. He grew rapidly like a yam tendril in the rainy season, and was full of the sap of life. (7.1)

#### THOUGHT:

Because he is so closely tied to the earth, Ikemefuna's growth and development are described in terms of youth present in the natural world – yam tendrils and sap.

[Go to CHAPTER 7 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell, and which she no doubt still told to her younger children – stories of the tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird *eneke-nti-oba* who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat. He remembered the story she often told of the quarrel between Earth and Sky long ago, and how Sky withheld rain for seven years, until crops withered and the dead could not be buried because the hoes broke on the stony Earth. At last Vulture was sent to plead with Sky, and to soften his heart with a

song of the suffering of the sons of men. Whenever Nwoye's mother sang this song he felt carried away to the distant scene in the sky where Vulture, Earth's emissary, sang for mercy. At last Sky was moved to pity, and he gave to Vulture rain wrapped in leaves of coco-yam. But as he flew home his long talon pierced the leaves and the rain fell as it had never fallen before. And so heavily did it rain on Vulture that he did not return to deliver his message but flew to a distant land, from where he had espied a fire. And when he got there he found it was a man making a sacrifice. He warmed himself in the fire and ate the entrails. (7.3)

#### THOUGHT:

Nwoye is inexplicably drawn to stories that anthropomorphize nature and its creatures. The implication here seems to be that children – being innocent and pure in their youth – are naturally drawn to mother earth in all its wonder, even when it is only in words. There is something fantastic about imagining the natural elements and animals with human personas, it seems to draw connections between man and the natural world. These stories, to Nwoye, are more fascinating than the completely human-centered stories of violence and bloodshed.

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#### QUOTE:

“Locusts are descending,” was joyfully chanted everywhere, and men, women and children left their work or their play and ran into the open to see the unfamiliar sight. The locusts had not come for many, many years, and only the old people had seen them before.

[...]

Everyone was now about, talking excitedly and praying that the locusts should camp in Umuofia for the night. For although locusts had not visited Umuofia for many years, everybody knew by instinct that they were very good to eat. And at last the locusts did descend. They settled on every tree

and on every blade of grass; they settled on the roofs and covered the bare ground. Mighty tree branches broke away under them, and the whole country became the brown-earth color of the vast, hungry swarm.

Many people went out with baskets trying to catch them, but the elders counseled patience till nightfall. And they were right. The locusts settled in the bushes for the night and their wings became wet with dew. Then all Umuofia turned out in spite of the cold harmattan, and everyone filled his bags and pots with locusts. The next morning they were roasted in clay pots and then spread in the sun until they became dry and brittle. And for many days this rare food was eaten with solid palm-oil. (7.10-13)

#### THOUGHT:

The Umuofia capitalize on natural phenomenon, such as this locust plague. They live off what nature provides them with and don't shun any of the gifts nature offers.

[Go to CHAPTER 7 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

The footway had now become a narrow line in the heart of the forest. The short trees and sparse undergrowth which surrounded the men's village began to give way to giant trees and climbers which perhaps had stood from the beginning of things, untouched by the ax and the bush-fire. The sun breaking through their leaves and branches threw a pattern of light and shade on the sandy footway. (7.23)

#### THOUGHT:

Achebe describes the forest in these terms to highlight the difference between the civilized world of the village and the wilderness of untamed nature. It also sets an ominous mood that foreshadows Ikemefuna's death. The description of the "giant trees" as fossils of the "beginning of things"

refers to the primeval nature of the wilderness which has changed only minimally over time and has barely registered the coming of man.

[Go to CHAPTER 7 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

The men in the *obi* had already begun to drink the palm-wine which Akueke's suitor had brought. It was a very good wine and powerful, for in spite of the palm fruit hung across the mouth of the pot to restrain the lively liquor, white foam rose and spilled over.

"That wine is the work of a good tapper," said Okonkwo.

The young suitor, whose name was Ibe, smiled broadly and said to his father: "Do you heart that?" He then said to the others: "He will never admit that I am a good tapper."

"He tapped three of my best palm trees to death," said his father, Ukebgu. (8.70-73)

THOUGHT:

In this scene, the men condemn the killing of trees for wine while simultaneously enjoying that same wine. The earth here acts as both provider and victim of men.

[Go to CHAPTER 8 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

"It is *iba*," said Okonkwo as he took his machete and went into the bush to collect the leaves and grasses and barks of tree that went into making the medicine for *iba*. (9.7)

THOUGHT:

The earth provides ways for humans to combat disease. This furthers the idea that sickness is an abomination to the earth.

[Go to CHAPTER 9 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

The priestess' voice was already growing faint in the distance. Ekwefi hurried to the main footpath and turned left in the direction of the voice. Her eyes were useless to her in the darkness. But she picked her way easily on the sandy footpath hedged on either side by branches and damp leaves. She began to run, holding her breasts with her hands to stop them flapping noisily against her body. She hit her left foot against an outcropped root, and terror seized her. It was an ill omen. She ran faster...Although the night was cool, Ekwefi was beginning to feel hot from her running. She continually ran into the luxuriant weeds and creepers that walled in the path. Once she tripped up and fell. (11.52)

THOUGHT:

The wilderness seems to be working against Ekwefi, keeping her from reaching her abducted daughter, blinding her to the path, and inspiring fear in her.

[Go to CHAPTER 11 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezeudu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts again Okonkwo. His greatest



friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman. (13.15)

#### THOUGHT:

The Umuofia believe that killing a brother clansman is a sin against the earth – the provider of life, the matchless nurturer of life, and the ultimate mother. The village believes that the earth will turn against them if the sin isn't atoned for.

[Go to CHAPTER 13 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

At last the rain came. It was sudden tremendous. For two or three moons the sun had been gathering strength till it seemed to breathe a breath of fire on the earth. All the grass had long been scorched brown, and the sands felt like live coals to the feet. Evergreen trees wore a dusty coat of brown. The birds were silenced in the forests, and the world lay panting under the live, vibrating heat. And then came the clap of thunder. It was an angry, metallic and thirsty clap, unlike the deep and liquid rumbling of the rainy season. A mighty wind arose and filled the air with dust. Palm trees swayed as the wind combed their leaves into flying crests like strange and fantastic coiffure.

When the rain finally came, it was in large, solid drops of frozen water which the people called “the nuts of the water of heaven.” They were hard and painful on the body as they fell, yet young people ran about happily picking up the cold nuts and throwing them into their mouths to melt.

The earth quickly came to life and the birds in the forest fluttered around and chirped merrily. A vague scent of life and green vegetation was diffused in the air. As the rain began to fall more soberly and in smaller liquid drops, children sought for shelter, and all were happy, refreshed and thankful. (14.4-6)

#### THOUGHT:

The Umuofia people are at the mercy of nature; they depend on the timely arrival of the rains for their crops. Here, the earth is characterized as an entity separate from the sky. The earth, too, depends on the sky's providence to renew her life every rainy season.

[Go to CHAPTER 14 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul – the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth. (16.24)

#### THOUGHT:

Nwoye sees the missionaries' hymn as such a source of relief that he is compared to the thirsty earth drinking in rain. This comparison is especially appropriate since children throughout the novel are particularly affiliated with the earth, while rain (like the hymn) is associated with the heavens (or sky). For Nwoye, Christianity will prove to be his new wellspring, a means of rebirth, just as seasonal rains renew the floral life of the earth.

[Go to CHAPTER 16 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Every clan and village had its “evil forest.” In it were buried all those who died of the really evil diseases, like leprosy and smallpox. It was also the dumping ground for the potent fetishes of great medicine men when they died. An “evil forest” was, therefore, alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness. It was such a forest that the rulers of Mbanta gave to the missionaries. They did not really want them in the clan, and so they made them that offer which nobody in his right senses would accept. (17.3)

THOUGHT:

This “evil forest” represents the unknown (and potentially evil) side of nature – the wilderness, an untamed place often hostile to men.

[Go to CHAPTER 17 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

The last big rains of the year were falling. It was the time for treading red earth with which to build walls. It was not done earlier because the rains were too heavy and would have washed away the heap of trodden earth; and it could not done later because harvesting would soon set in, and after that the dry season. (19.1)

THOUGHT:

Nature’s seasons determine the Umuofia calendar. The implied message is that if the Umuofia don’t follow nature’s calendar, the earth can cause damage as easily as it can provide and nurture.

[Go to CHAPTER 19 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Ekwefi rose early on the following morning and went to her farm with her daughter, Ezinma, and Ojiugo’s daughter, Obiageli, to harvest cassava tubers. Each of them carried a long cane basket, a machete for cutting down

the soft cassava stem, and a little hoe for digging out the tuber. Fortunately, a light rain had fallen during the night and the soil would not be very hard...

The harvesting was easy, as Ekwefi had said. Ezinma shook every tree violently with a long stick before she bent down to cut the stem and dig out the tuber. Sometimes it was not necessary to dig. They just pulled the stump, and earth rose, roots snapped below, and the tuber was pulled out. (19.8-12)

#### THOUGHT:

It's appropriate that the women, the human equivalents of the mother earth, reap the riches of the earth for a banquet. The trope of the banquet is not only meal but a celebration of food and family that encapsulates everything the nurturing earth stands for. Here, nature shows compassion towards the women by sprinkling a light rain on the soil to make digging for tubers especially easy.

[Go to CHAPTER 19 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

The annual worship of the earth goddess fell on a Sunday, and the masked spirits were abroad. The Christian women who had been to church could not therefore go home. Some of their men had gone out to beg the *egwugwu* to retire for a short while for the women to pass. They agreed and were already retiring, when Enoch boasted aloud that they would dare to touch a Christian. Whereupon they all came back and one of them gave Enoch a good stroke of the cane, which was always carried. (22.9)

#### THOUGHT:

This scene depicts the worshippers of the earth coming into conflict with the upstart new religion, Christianity.

[Go to CHAPTER 22 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

The courthouse, like the church, was built a little way outside the village. The footpath that linked them was a very busy one because it also led to the stream, beyond the court. It was open and sandy. Footpaths were open and sandy in the dry season. But when the rains came the bush grew thick on either side and closed in on the path. It was now dry season. (24.2)

THOUGHT:

The Christians place their courthouse and church at a strategic spot, one that reaps benefits from the earth (through the stream) and makes their buildings impossible for the Umuofia to avoid. However, the earth seems set against the Christians, closing off the footpath linking the church to the village during the rainy season.

[Go to CHAPTER 24 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Obierika on Okonkwo's corpse]: "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers." (25.15)

THOUGHT:

Suicide is a sin against the earth because people in fact owe their lives to the fertility and life-giving nature of the earth. Killing oneself is akin to thumbing one's nose at the earth's generosity.

[Go to CHAPTER 25 SUMMARY](#)

## **Theme and Quote Analysis on: Fate and Free Will**

### **Theme Summary**

Social rank and relative wealth play great roles in determining a person's destiny in Umuofia society. But sometimes a man with sheer force of will can change his stars through hard work and a smattering of luck. One of the main conflicts in *Things Fall Apart* is the clash between Okonkwo's determination to succeed and fate – which seems to have less appetizing things in mind. However, Okonkwo's will does play a major factor in determining his future; he chooses to kill Ikemefuna with his own hands, he chooses to kill a government official, and in the end, he chooses to take his own life. Whether or not negative events in his life are tied to these three crimes or if they are just the result of chance or fate is debatable.

### **Study Questions**

1. How is Okonkwo's destiny viewed in the beginning of the book? Why is it seen so positively?
2. To what extent is Okonkwo's life governed by forces outside his control?
3. What deliberate choices does Okonkwo make that further his path towards self-destruction?
4. Consider Ikemefuna. How does he, as a character, epitomize a victim more than anyone else in the novel?

### **Sample Thesis Statements**

Even though Okonkwo often exercises his “inflexible will,” fate ultimately clashes with and dominates his free will to bring about his demise.

Although the missionaries comprise a formidable force, the Igbo people were not fated to fall to white men. By exercising their will and making key decisions, the Igbo could have avoided the disunity that followed the arrival of the missionaries.

### **Quotes & Thoughts on Fate and Free Will**

#### **QUOTE:**

Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders. (1.16)

#### **THOUGHT:**

Because of his own hard work and dedication, Okonkwo’s future looks bright. It seems that he is indeed able to influence his own destiny with his sheer will.

[Go to CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY](#)

#### **QUOTE:**

And that was how he came to look after the doomed lad who was sacrificed to the village of Umuofia by their neighbors to avoid war and bloodshed. The ill-fated lad was called Ikemefuna. (1.16)

#### THOUGHT:

From the very beginning, Ikemefuna's name is associated with doom. This blatant foreshadowing prepares readers for something dreadful to happen to Ikemefuna. It also shows that Ikemefuna isn't in control of his own destiny.

[Go to CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

The elders, or *ndichie*, met to hear a report of Okonkwo's mission. At the end they decided, as everybody knew they would, that the girl should go to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered wife. As for the boy, he belonged to the clan as a whole, and there was no hurry to decide his fate. (2.11)

#### THOUGHT:

Since "everybody knew" what would happen after the Umuofia woman's murder, justice seems inevitable – or at least predictable. The fates of the two Mbaino children are decided for them – without their consultation or consent – simply because one of their tribesman committed a crime. The two youths are given no choice in their destinies.

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Unoka was an ill-fated man. He had a bad chi or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave, or rather to his death, for he had no grave. He died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess. When a man was afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die. There was the story of a very stubborn man who staggered back to his house and had to be carried again to the forest and tied to a tree. The sickness was an abomination to the earth, and so the victim



could not be buried in her bowels. He died and rotted away above the earth, and was not given the first of the second burial. Such was Unoka's fate.  
(3.8)

#### THOUGHT:

Unoka seems to be fated for doom. He is lazy, and therefore unsuccessful not because that's the way he's chosen to live his life, but because he was born with a bad *chi*. His life is shameful and his death offers no redemption or even an easy way out. He dies in shame.

[Go to CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

The year that Okonkwo took eight hundred seed-yams from Nwakibie was the worst year in living memory. Nothing happened at its proper time; it was either too early or too late. It seemed as if the world had gone mad. The first rains were late, and, when they came, lasted only a brief moment. The blazing sun returned, more fierce than it had ever been known, and scorched all the green that had appeared with the rains. The earth burned like hot coals and roasted all the yams that had been sown. Like all good farmers, Okonkwo had begun to sow with the first rains. He had sown four hundred seeds when the rains dried up and the heat returned. He watched the sky all day for signs of rain clouds and lay awake all night. In the morning he went back to his farm and saw the withering tendrils. He had tried to protect them from the smoldering earth by making rings of thick sisal leaves around them. But by the end of the day the sisal rings were burned dry and gray. He changed them every day, and prayed that the rain might fall in the night. But the drought continued for eight market weeks and the yams were killed...

Okonkwo planted what was left of his seed-yams when the rains finally returned. He had one consolation. The yams he had sown before the drought were his own, the harvest of the previous. He still had the eight hundred from Nwakibie and the four hundred from his father's friend. So he

would make a fresh start.

But the year had gone mad. Rain fell as it had never fallen before. For days and nights together it poured down in violent torrents, and washed away the yam heaps. Trees were uprooted and deep gorges appeared everywhere. Then the rain became less violent. But it went from day to day without a pause. The spell of sunshine which always came in the middle of the wet season did not appear. The yams put on luxuriant green leaves, but every farmer knew that without sunshine the tubers would not grow.

That year the harvest was sad, like a funeral, and many farmers wept as they dug up the miserable and rotting yams. One man tied his cloth to a tree branch and hanged himself. (3.29-33)

THOUGHT:

Fate seems to have disaster in store for the Umuofia people, especially Okonkwo, that year. However, by force of his will, Okonkwo is able to overcome this insanely bad luck and even prosper in the coming years.

[Go to CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Okonkwo returned when he felt the medicine had cooked long enough...

“Bring me a low stool for Ezinma,” he said, “and a thick mat.”

He took down the pot from the fire and placed it in front of the stool. He then roused Ezinma and placed her on the stool, astride of the steaming pot. The thick mat was thrown over both. Ezinma struggled to escape from the choking and overpowering steam, but she was held down. She started to cry.

When the mat was at last removed she was drenched in perspiration. Ekwefi

mopped her with a piece of cloth and she lay down on a dry mat and was soon asleep. (9.76-79)

#### THOUGHT:

Okonkwo puts in a supreme effort of skill and will to bring Ezinma, his beloved daughter, back from the edge of death. Though she is an *ogbanje* child, destined to repeat rapid cycle of death and rebirth, Okonkwo is able to save Ezinma from her illness.

[Go to CHAPTER 9 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

All was silent. In the center of the crowd a boy lay in a pool of blood. It was the dead man's sixteen-year-old-son, who with his brothers and half-brothers had been dancing the traditional farewell to their father. Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart...

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years... (13.16)

#### THOUGHT:

Okonkwo kills a boy by accident. This incident could be read as a whim of fate that has devastating consequences on Okonkwo, even though it was inadvertent. An alternative reading is that the accidental crime is Okonkwo's payback for his poor choice to kill Ikemefuna.

[Go to CHAPTER 13 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Uchendu]: “Is it right that you, Okonkwo, should bring to your mother a heavy face and refuse to be comforted? Be careful or you may displease the dead. Your duty is to comfort your wives and children and take them back to your fatherland after seven years. But if you allow sorrow to weigh you down and kill you, they will all die in exile.” (14.32)

THOUGHT:

Uchendu warns Okonkwo of willfully displeasing the dead. As spirits, they seem to have some power to influence fate and could, if insulted, bring about destruction on a wide, generational scale.

[Go to CHAPTER 14 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

He told them that the true God lived on high and that all men when they died went before Him for judgment. Evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm-oil. But good men who worshipped the true God lived forever in His happy kingdom. (16.9)

THOUGHT:

The missionaries depict salvation as a choice one makes between good and evil. One’s own fate hangs in his own hands.

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QUOTE:

Why, he cried in his heart, should he, Okonkwo, of all people, be cursed with such a son. He saw clearly in it the finger of his personal god or *chi*.

For how else could he explain his great misfortune and exile and now his despicable son's behavior? Now that he had time to think of it, his son's crime stood out in its stark enormity. To abandon the gods of one's father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. (17.25)

THOUGHT:

In a moment of despair, Okonkwo sees one possible road fate could take him down, despite all his efforts to raise Nwoye correctly. He sees, rather prophetically, the extinction of his entire family line.

[Go to CHAPTER 17 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

"It is not our custom to fight for our gods," said one of them. "Let us not presume to do so now. If a man kills the sacred python in the secrecy of his hut, the matter lies between him and the god. We did not see it. If we put ourselves between the god and his victim we may receive blows intended for the offender. When a man blasphemes, what do we do? Do we go and stop his mouth? No. We put our fingers into our ears to stop us hearing. That is a wise action."

"Let us not reason like cowards," said Okonkwo. "If a man comes into my hut and defecates 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." Okonkwo made a sound full of disgust. This was a womanly clan, he thought. Such a thing could never happen in his fatherland, Umuofia. (18.21-22)

THOUGHT:

While one clansman advises passivity, Okonkwo wants to exercise his will and force the Christians out of Umuofia. He has always been a man to act and attempt to change his stars. While other men are content to look away while Fate “defecates on the floor,” Okonkwo would rather “take a stick and break [its] head.”

[Go to CHAPTER 18 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

He [Okonkwo] knew that he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan. He had lost the chance to lead his warlike clan against the new religion, which, he was told, had gained ground. He had lost the years in which he might have taken the highest titles in the land. But some of these losses were not irreparable. He was determined that his return should be marked by his people. He would return with a flourish, and regain the seven wasted years. (20.2)

THOUGHT:

It seems that fate has decreed that Okonkwo would inadvertently shoot off a gun and accidentally kill someone; it has also decreed that he must spend seven years in exile while his prime years go by, wasted. But Okonkwo is determined to fight fate to the end and win back what was lost.

[Go to CHAPTER 20 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Okonkwo to Obierika]: “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. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” (20.25)

#### THOUGHT:

Okonkwo suggests that the Umuofia were foolish and blind for letting the white man stay to work tricks. Now, by force of the Christians' will and lack of their own, the Umuofia have fallen apart from the inside. It's interesting to consider whether the Umuofia clan might have fallen apart even without the arrival of the Christians.

[Go to CHAPTER 20 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

[Okonkwo]: "Afraid? I do not care what he does to *you*. I despise him and those who listen to him. I shall fight alone if I choose." (24.18)

#### THOUGHT:

Okonkwo proudly declares his courage to fight whoever he wants, even if he is fighting a losing battle. This harkens back to Okonkwo's survival through the horrible year of flood and drought early in his life when he made it through only by force of his indomitable will.

[Go to CHAPTER 24 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

"The white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop."

In a flash Okonkwo drew his machete. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo's machete descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body.

The waiting backcloth jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting was stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia

would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: “Why did he do it?” (24.39-41)

THOUGHT:

When faced with his hated enemies, Okonkwo makes a split-second decision and exercises his will by killing the insolent messenger. This is fateful because it should urge the Umuofia to attack more strongly than any other gesture could. Yet the Umuofia, whether by will or being restrained by fate, do not go to war. This helps Okonkwo to make his final decision – to commit suicide.

[Go to CHAPTER 24 SUMMARY](#)



# **Theme and Quote Analysis on: Language and Communication**

## **Theme Summary**

Speech is highly stylized in Igbo culture, with specific rules on how to address a neighbor, a superior, an ancestral spirits, and the gods. Respect is usually at the heart of formal speech. While dialogue is usually direct in its meaning, speakers often adorn conversations with proverbs or references to folktales, which play a profound role in shaping Igbo beliefs. Language, too, has a way of either including or alienating a listener. The gods have their own language which lowly humans cannot understand. The Christians speak English and require an interpreter to communicate with the Umuofia. However, interpreters are often from different parts of the country and have noticeable differences in speech. So concepts and connotations are inevitably lost in translation.

## **Study Questions**

1. How do men of the Umuofia greet each other? How do they greet crowds of people when speaking? What is the underlying motivation of such speech?
2. How is music – in particular drums – a language in itself? How does it set tones and convey information?
3. Does Okonkwo communicate effectively with any of his family members or does he just expect to have his mind read? Does he like Ezinma so much because she understands him without him having to communicate verbally?
4. How do gods and spirits address humans and how must humans greet these superior beings? What is the implication in each one's address?
5. Are important concepts of Christianity and Igbo beliefs lost in translation? Are important Igbo beliefs misunderstood by the Christians because of poor translation?

6. Why is it dangerous to kill a man who is silent? Think about the Abame clan that was annihilated after killing a white man they were unable to communicate with.

### **Sample Thesis Statements**

The troubles in Okonkwo and Nwoye's relationships are the result of bad communications; neither shares his emotions with each other and Okonkwo quickly jumps to aggressive physical action, which halts communication.

### **Quotes & Thoughts on Language and Communication**

QUOTE:

He [Okonkwo] had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. (1.3)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo has no talent with words; in fact, they are something of a handicap to him. He stammers when he speaks, compromising his ability to express himself well in language, and loses his capacity to talk completely when angered. Fighting, to him, is a good substitute for words.

[Go to CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

He [Unoka] always said that whenever he saw a dead man's mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime. (1.4)

#### THOUGHT:

This proverb is a formal spoken account of a moral put into words: eat the food available to you and you won't starve.

[Go to CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

He [Unoka] was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung about the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. Sometimes another village would ask Unoka's band and their dancing *egwugwu* to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. They would go to such hosts for as long as three or four markets, making music and feasting. Unoka loved the good fare and the good fellowship... (1.5)

#### THOUGHT:

Unoka finds himself more able to express his happiness in music than words. Music, to him, is far more expressive and fun than speaking or trying to justify his life with words. Music is his way of creating "good fellowship" with others when he otherwise might be laughed off.

[Go to CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten. Okoye was a great talker and he spoke for a long time, skirting round the subject and then hitting it finally. (1.14)

#### THOUGHT:

Language is a very important part of Igbo culture and is highly stylized. Instead of just saying, “Unoka, give me my damn money back,” Okoye must steep his message in fanciful and well-known proverbs, only slowly getting to his point. Correct speech is a symbol of respectability among these people. Unoka reveals his lack of respectability by later responding by laughing and with the terse, straightforward information that Okoye won’t be getting his money back any time soon.

[Go to CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders. (1.16)

#### THOUGHT:

This stylized proverb illustrates one of the Igbo’s highest values – personal responsibility. If a man “washes his hands” or pays off all his debts and is able to stand on his own, he may mingle with the most respected elders.

[Go to CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Okonkwo had just blown out the palm-oil lamp and stretched himself on his bamboo bed when he heard the *ogene* of the town crier piercing the still night air. *Gome, gome, gome, gome*, boomed the hollow metal. Then the crier gave his message, and at the end of it beat his instrument again. And this was the message. Every man of Umuofia was asked to gather at the market place tomorrow morning. (2.1)

#### THOUGHT:

Achebe describes musical instruments as not only having voices, but actually speaking. Here, the drums have the capacity to deliver specific messages to the entire community in one fell swoop.

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them. Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits. Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear. It was called a string. (2.2)

#### THOUGHT:

Words, especially names, hold a special power in Igbo belief. Evil spirits or animals are never referred to by name for fear of summoning them and bringing disaster upon the clan. A “string” here is a euphemism for the evil word “snake.”

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

“*Umuofia kwenu,*” he bellowed a fifth time, and the crowd yelled in answer. And then suddenly like one possessed he shot out his left hand and pointed in the direction of Mbaino, and said through gleaming white teeth firmly clenched: “Those sons of wild animals have dared to murder a daughter of Umuofia.” He threw his head down and gnashed his teeth, and allowed a murmur of suppressed anger to sweep the crowd. When he began again, the anger on his face was gone and in its place a sort of smile governed, more terrible and more sinister than the anger. And in a clear unemotional voice

he told Umuofia how their daughter had gone to market at Mbaino and had been killed. (2.6)

#### THOUGHT:

Announcements are made with much ado and ceremony in Umuofia. Public speaking requires a repeated summoning of the tribe through the mouthpiece of a trained orator. The call-and-response nature of announcements ensures that all of the community is involved and is paying attention. And the message is conveyed with a very specific rhythm.

[Go to CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

He [Okonkwo] took a pot of palm-wine and a cock to Nwakibie...He presented a kola nut and an alligator pepper, which were passed round for all to see and then returned to him. He broke the nut saying: "We shall all live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break."

After the kola nut had been eaten Okonkwo brought his palm-wine from the corner of the hut where it had been placed and stood it in the center of the group. He addressed Nwakibie, calling him "Our father."

"*Nna ayi,*" he said. "I have brought you this little kola. As our people say, a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness. I have come to pay you my respects and also to ask a favor. But let us drink the wine first." (3.11-13)

#### THOUGHT:

The language of presenting gifts and asking favors of someone is very formal and stylized. It includes the show of much respect by wishing luck

and happiness on one's host and linguistically making him part of one's family.

[Go to CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Okonkwo]: "I have cleared a farm but have no yams to sow. I know what it is to ask a man to trust another with his yams, especially these days when young men are afraid of hard work. I am not afraid of work. The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did. I began to fend for myself at an age when most people still suck at their mothers' breasts. If you give me some yam seeds I shall not fail you." (3.25)

THOUGHT:

Here, Okonkwo uses language in a binding way, by making a promise. By putting his intention into words, he makes them true on some level and thus binds himself to Nwakibie's service.

[Go to CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

His father, Unoka, who was then an ailing man, had said to him during that terrible harvest month: "Do not despair. I know you will not despair. You have a manly and a proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and bitter when a man fails alone."

Unoka was like that in his last days. His love of talk had grown with age and sickness. It tried Okonkwo's patience beyond words. (3.36-37)

THOUGHT:

Even though Unoka's words are given with a generous spirit, Okonkwo does not appreciate them. Indeed, Okonkwo doesn't value words – he prefers action over speech. However, this renders him unable to appreciate the sincerity of others' words and keeps him from expressing himself in a way that most people understand: through language.

[Go to CHAPTER 3 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Okonkwo did as the priest said. He also took with him a pot of palm-wine. Inwardly, he was repentant. But he was not the man to go about telling his neighbors that he was in error. And so people said he had no respect for the gods of the clan. His enemies said his good fortune had gone to his head. They called him the little bird *nza* who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his *chi*. (4.23)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo is a man of actions, not words. But his neighbors aren't mind readers and mostly understand emotions only when people verbally convey them. As a result of his tight-lipped nature, Okonkwo's neighbors easily misread his character and his reputation harmed.

[Go to CHAPTER 4 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

The drums were still beating, persistent and unchanging. Their sound was no longer a separate thing from the living village. It was like the pulsation of its heart. It throbbed in the air, in the sunshine, and even in the trees, and filled the village with excitement. (5.53)

THOUGHT:



Like some mysterious but primal language, the drums are able to move people to excitement without words but only with a persistent beat, almost like a heartbeat.

[Go to CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Then quite suddenly a thought came upon him. His mother might be dead. He tried in vain to force the thought out of his mind. Then he tried to settle the matter the way he used to settle such matters when he was a little boy. He still remembered the song:

*Eze elina, elina!*

*Sala*

*Eze ilikwa ya*

*Ikwaba akwa oligholi*

*Ebe Danda bechi eze*

*Ebe Uzuzu nete egwu*

*Sala*

He sang it in his mind, and walked to its beat. If the song ended on his right foot, his mother was alive. If it ended on his left, she was dead. No, not dead, but ill. (7.26)

THOUGHT:

By leaving the song untranslated, Achebe emphasizes the importance it has for Ikemefuna beyond words. Perhaps it was sung to him as a young child before he could understand the words and he associated it with his mother long before he could comprehend its meaning.

[Go to CHAPTER 7 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger,” Okonkwo said. “A child’s fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm.” (8.27)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo uses a proverb to illustrate his point. He hopes he will not be scalded by the “hot yam” of killing Ikemefuna. But in a deeper sense he says the words with the hope that they might come true, because internally Okonkwo feels deeply guilty about killing his adopted son.

[Go to CHAPTER 8 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

As the men drank, they talked about everything except the thing for which they had gathered. It was only after the pot had been emptied that the suitor’s father cleared his voice and announced the object of their visit. (8.75)

THOUGHT:

To show politeness, the visitors discuss everything but their intended topic. It would be considered rude in Igbo society to cut straight to the chase when there is still food and drink to be enjoyed.

[Go to CHAPTER 8 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

The *egwugwu* house was now a pandemonium of quavering voices: *Aru oyim de de de dei!* Filled the air as the spirits of the ancestors, just emerged from the earth, greeted themselves in their esoteric language. (10.4)

THOUGHT:

The *egwugwu* spirits have their own unintelligible language that sets them apart from the inferior mortal counterparts.

[Go to CHAPTER 10 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“*Umuofia kwenu!*” shouted the leading *egwugwu*, pushing the air with his raffia arms. The elders of the clan replied, “*Yaa!*”

“*Umuofia kwenu!*”

“*Yaa!*”

“*Umuofia kwenu!*”

“*Yaa!*” (10.9-13)

THOUGHT:

The *egwugwu* use the same phrases and call-and-response format as orators getting the attention of a large crowd. This might mean that the *egwugwu* are stooping to human language so that their subjects can understand them. Or, from a more skeptical viewpoint, this could be proof that the *egwugwu* are simply masked men – not gods – because they use the same language as men.

[Go to CHAPTER 10 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“Uzowulu’s body, I salute you,” he said. Spirits always addressed humans as “bodies.” Uzowulu bent down and touched the earth with his right hand as a sign of submission. (10.17)

## THOUGHT:

To emphasize their superiority and true spirituality, the *egwugwu* address humans with the inferior term “bodies,” implying that their spirits are not really strong, perhaps because they are trapped inside mortal vessels.

[Go to CHAPTER 10 SUMMARY](#)

## QUOTE:

[Tortoise in Ekwefi’s story]: “There is one important thing which we must not forget,’ he said as they flew on their way. ‘When people are invited to a great feast like this, they take new names for the occasion. Our hosts in the sky will expect us to honor this age-old custom.’

‘None of the birds had heard of this custom but they knew that Tortoise... was a widely-traveled man who knew the customs of different peoples. And so they each took a new name. When they had all taken, Tortoise also took one. He was to be called *All of you.*’” (11.13-14)

## THOUGHT:

The act of changing one’s name is essentially changing one’s identity. In this case, the act of renaming changes Tortoise and the birds into new beings, ridding themselves of old sins, and making them worthy to sit among the heavenly people of the sky. This is the argument Tortoise uses to convince the birds to take new names, but in reality, he is using language for a much more devious purpose.

[Go to CHAPTER 11 SUMMARY](#)

## QUOTE:

The priestess screamed. “Beware, Okonkwo!” she warned. Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks?

Beware!” (11.32)

THOUGHT:

Speaking here is equated with having authority; thus it is considered disrespectful and insolent for a lowly man to speak when a god speaks.

[Go to CHAPTER 11 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Obierika]: “We are giving you our daughter today. She will be a good wife to you. She will bear you nine sons like the mother of our town.”

[The crowd]: “*Ee-e-e!*”

The oldest man in the camp of the visitors replied: “It will be good for you and it will be good for us.”

“*Ee-e-e!*”

This is not the first time my people have come to marry your daughter. My mother was one of you.”

“*Ee-e-e!*”

“Prosperous men and great warriors.” He looked in the direction of Okonkwo. “Your daughter will bear us sons like you.”

“*Ee-e-e!*” (12.41-52)

THOUGHT:

This exchange of words before at a wedding seems to have ritual significance. The words Obierika says have the weight of promises which, by vocalizing them, he hopes to make come true. The “*Ee-e-e!*” response of

the crowd seems to be some sort of collective affirmation or approval of the ceremony that lends credence to Obierika's words.

[Go to CHAPTER 12 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Obierika on Okonkwo's exile]: Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife's twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed? The Earth had decreed that they were an offense on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offense against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender. (13.16)

THOUGHT:

The fact that the Earth can issue a "decree" shows that the Umuofia consider the land a living being. The words of the Earth, on which the Umuofia depend, cannot be ignored for fear of devastating consequences.

[Go to CHAPTER 13 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

"What did the white man say before they killed him?" asked Uchendu.

"He said nothing," answered one of Obierika's companions.

"He said something, only they did not understand him," said Obierika. "He seemed to speak through his nose." (15.20-22)

THOUGHT:

The Umuofia speak a different language than the white men and neither side really tries to understand the other. Not understanding is akin to saying “nothing,” as Obierika’s friend points out. Obierika is more compassionate towards the foreigner. He realizes that he said something but the white man could not understand it.

[Go to CHAPTER 15 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Uchendu about the men of Abame who killed the silent white men and then were wiped out other white men]: “Never kill a man who says nothing. Those men of Abame were fools. What did they know about the man?” He ground his teeth again and told a story to illustrate his point. ‘Mother Kite once sent her daughter to bring food. She went, and brought back a duckling. ‘You have done very well,’ said Mother Kite to her daughter, ‘but tell me, what did the mother of this duckling say when you swooped and carried its child away?’ ‘It said nothing,’ replied the young kite. ‘It just walked away.’ ‘You must return the duckling,’ said Mother Kite. ‘There is something ominous behind the silence.’ And so Daughter Kite returned the duckling and took a chick instead. ‘What did the mother of this chick do?’ asked the old kite. ‘It cried and raved and cursed me,’ said the young kite. ‘Then we can eat the chick,’ said her mother. ‘There is nothing to fear from someone who shouts.’ Those men of Abame were fools.” (15.27)

THOUGHT:

There is something ominous about a man who is silent. Uchendu associates danger and even death with a silent man. Silence, especially in the face of death, indicates something fundamentally wrong with the individual’s humanity.

[Go to CHAPTER 15 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“There is no story that is not true,” said Uchendu. (15.30)

THOUGHT:

Uchendu recognizes that all stories – however fantastic – have some grounding in real-life events or truth.

[Go to CHAPTER 15 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

He [the white man] spoke through an interpreter who was an Ibo man, though his dialect was different and harsh to the ears of Mbanta. Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely. Instead of saying “myself” he always said “my buttocks.” (16.9)

THOUGHT:

Achebe remarks on how the different dialect of an interpreter can alter the speaker’s meaning or completely change the tone of a message. A humorous word substitution here means the people of Mbanta don’t take the white man seriously – at least not at first.

[Go to CHAPTER 16 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo’s first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul – the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth. (16.24)



#### THOUGHT:

It is not the logic of the words that touch Ikemefuna, but his own personal story that he associates with the poetic sounds of the words the missionaries are speaking. The song brings back to him the tragedy of Ikemefuna's needless death.

[Go to CHAPTER 16 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

[Okonkwo to Nwoye after he converts to Christianity]: "Where have you been?" he stammered

Nwoye struggled to free himself from the choking grip.

"Answer me," roared Okonkwo, "before I kill you!" He seized a heavy stick that lay on the dwarf wall and hit him two or three savage blows.

"Answer me!" he roared again. Nwoye stood looking at him and did not say a word. The women were screaming outside, afraid to go in. (17.16-19)

#### THOUGHT:

Though Okonkwo asks his son a question, he doesn't want to hear the answer. He prevents his son from confirming his terrible fears by choking him such that the young man can't speak.

[Go to CHAPTER 17 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Perhaps it never did happen. That was the way the clan at first looked at it. No one had actually seen the man do it. The story had arisen among the Christians themselves. (18.18)

THOUGHT:

The Umuofia doubt the truth of a story, a rumor. They do not believe the truth of something told by the Christians.

[Go to CHAPTER 18 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

These court messengers were greatly hated in Umuofia because they were foreigners and also arrogant and high-handed. They were called *kotma*, and because of their as-colored shorts they earned the additional name of Ashy-Buttocks. (20.16)

THOUGHT:

Here we see a linguistic phenomenon that occurs when two languages collide. The Igbo people who are unfamiliar with English find it difficult to say “court messenger” so they shorten it to make it easier and to fit their own lexicon. However, the word *kotma* doesn’t convey their intense hatred, so they choose a particularly unique and shameful trait of the *kotma* – their khaki shorts – and build a mocking nickname.

[Go to CHAPTER 20 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Obierika]: “In the end Oduche died and Aneto was taken to Umuru and hanged. The other people were released, but even now they have not found the mouth with which to tell of their suffering.”

The two men sat in silence for a long time afterwards. (20.28-29)

THOUGHT:

Words are inadequate to express the full intensity of the people's suffering in Obierika's story. Okonkwo and Obierika, too, are stunned and saddened beyond words.

[Go to CHAPTER 20 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

He [Mr. Brown] had just send Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, who was now called Isaac, to the new training college for teachers in Umuru. (21.22)

THOUGHT:

To signal his break from his old heathen ways (and probably his father), Nwoye changes his name to Isaac in an attempt to change his identity and Christianize himself.

[Go to CHAPTER 21 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

"One thing is clear," said Mr. Smith. "We cannot offer physical resistance to them. Our strength lies in the Lord." They knelt down together and prayed to God for delivery.

"O Lord, save Thy people," cried Mr. Smith. (22.15-16)

THOUGHT:

The Christians know that their strength, unlike the Umuofia, is not in warfare. They put their trust in language and its ability to touch their god and move Him to protect them. Their prayer is a plea for divine assistance.

[Go to CHAPTER 22 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

“The body of the white man, I salute you,” he said, using the language in which immortals spoke to men.

“The body of the white man, do you know me?” he asked.

Mr. Smith looked at his interpreter, but Okeke, who was a native of distant Umuru, was also at a loss.

Ajofia laughed in his guttural voice. It was like the laugh of rusty metal. “They are strangers,” he said, “and they are ignorant.” (22.24-27)

THOUGHT:

Ajofia, one of the *egwugwu*, uses the language typically used by gods to greet mortals. He calls Mr. Smith and his translator “bodies” but neither man understands Ajofia’s words or their significance. The two groups’ inability to comprehend each other is the root of their problems and it foreshadows greater misunderstandings.

[Go to CHAPTER 22 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Mr. Smith said to his interpreter: “Tell them to go away from here. This is the house of God and I will not live to see it desecrated.”

Okeke interpreted wisely to the spirits and leaders of Umuofia: “The white man says he is happy you have come to him with your grievances, like friends. He will be happy if you leave the matter in his hands.” (22.29-30)

THOUGHT:

Okeke changes not only the content of Mr. Smith’s message, but his tone as well. Notice that Achebe uses the words “interpreted wisely,” not “lied.”

This implies that Achebe knows there is always some degree of meaning or truth lost when translating from one language to another.

[Go to CHAPTER 22 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

[Okonkwo]: “An Umuofia man does not refuse a call,” he said. “He may refuse to do what he is asked; he does not refuse to be asked.” (23.6)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo’s maxim illustrates one of the qualities an Umuofia man prides himself on – generosity and willingness to listen. An Umuofia man honors a summoner and hears his words respectfully.

[Go to CHAPTER 23 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

Okudo sang a war song in a way that no other man could. He was not a fighter, but his voice turned every man into a lion. (24.7)

THOUGHT:

Okonkwo admires the power of language and song to breathe courage into men and steel them for war.

[Go to CHAPTER 24 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

The Commissioner did not understand what Obierika meant when he said “Perhaps your men will help us.” One of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words, he thought. (25.8)

#### THOUGHT:

The Commissioner, like Okonkwo, doesn't put much stock in words. Instead, he finds them rather annoying. Because he does not understand Obierika's meaning, he immediately dismisses the man's words as "superfluous" and "infuriating" – when they're actually pretty straightforward from Obierika's standpoint.

[Go to CHAPTER 25 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

Obierika, who had been gazing steadily at his friend's dangling body, turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." He could not say any more. His voice trembled and choked his words. (25.18)

#### THOUGHT:

Obierika is so overcome by the unfairness and tragedy of Okonkwo's death that he cannot express it in words. Like Okonkwo when he was worked up, Obierika "choke[s] on his words."

[Go to CHAPTER 25 SUMMARY](#)

#### QUOTE:

The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. (25.22)

#### THOUGHT:

The Commissioner reduces Okonkwo's life, about which Achebe's whole book has been written, to a paragraph. By recording what little he knows about Okonkwo as a man, he is essentially freezing Okonkwo in a limited and woefully misunderstood way. It is these words, not Okonkwo's honor, that will be passed on to posterity. Because the Commissioner is determined to "cut out details", Okonkwo will be remembered only as a savage.

[Go to CHAPTER 25 SUMMARY](#)

QUOTE:

He [the Commissioner] had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.  
(25.22)

THOUGHT:

The Commissioner reduces much of the story told by Achebe to a cold and biased imperialist report. Because we have followed Okonkwo's story and seen society through his understanding eyes, we see the Igbo people more sympathetically than the power-mongering Commissioner.

[Go to CHAPTER 25 SUMMARY](#)

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# Things Fall Apart

by Chinua Achebe

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