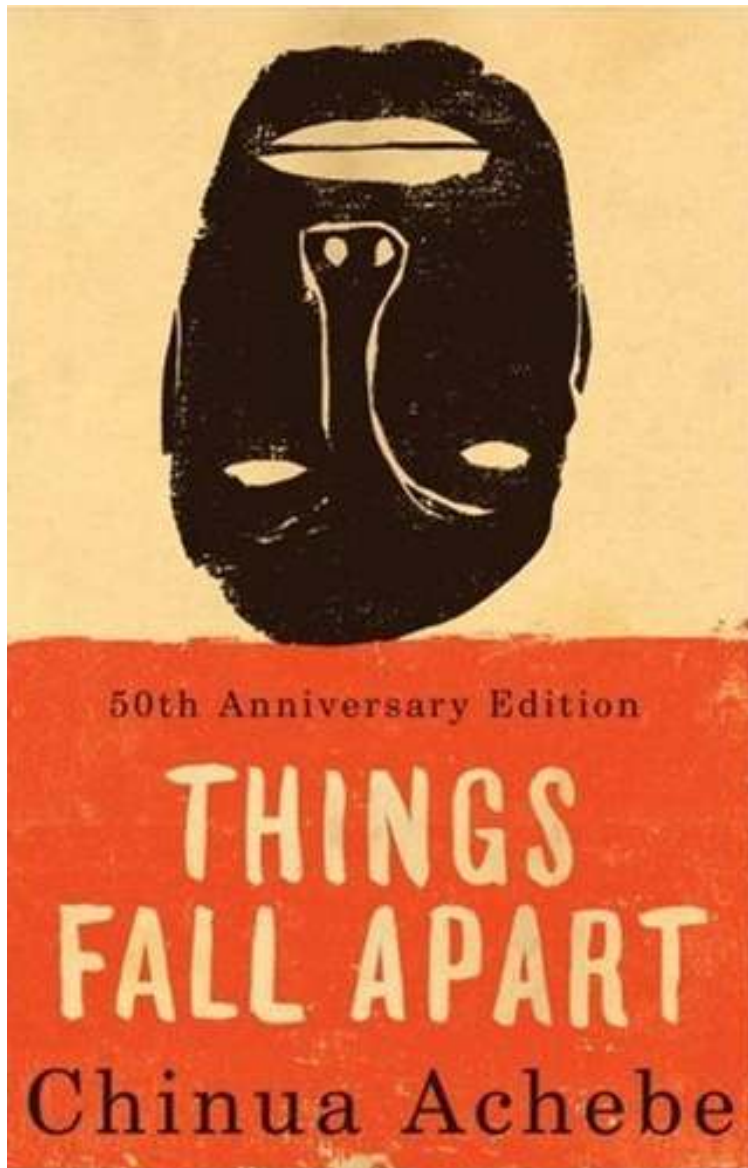


Things Fall Apart
Reading Guide/Reflective Work



AP English Literature & Composition

Name _____

Summer Reading Analysis Journal - Due on the first day of school

As you read each of your three novels over the summer (*Jane Eyre*, *Brave New World*, and *Things Fall Apart*), you should keep an Analysis Journal nearby to write down notes, thoughts, and questions. This is a crucial part of being an active reader — being aware of what you're thinking as you read, and making sense of each text while you move through it.

Be sure to write down page numbers and locators ("top of the page") to help you locate an important selection later. (Placing post-its in the book is also a good way to mark key passages.) Remember that we will spend the first few weeks of the school year analyzing these texts, so be prepared!

In addition to these informal entries, you will also write a series of polished Analysis Journal pieces. **For each book, you will write four entries:** One after you have completed 25% of the book; one when you are halfway through; one after you have read 75%, and one when you finish the novel. These entries should be two paragraphs in length each, a half-page (400 words) minimum. (Four half-page entries for each of three novels = six (6) pages of writing total.) These polished entries must be typed (double-spaced).

These should *not* be simplistic stream-of-consciousness ramblings. Organize your thoughts and address literary elements like setting, character development, thematic exposition, symbolism, and narrative style. Write in a professional manner, and proofread your work before turning it in. Remember that with each assignment you are practicing the skills required for AP Exams.

Some questions you might address in your polished Analysis Journal writing:

25% Entry

- How does the novel compare to your expectations?
- What are your first impressions of the author's style?
- Which character intrigues you most and why?
- How does the story's setting affect the lives of the characters?
- What do you expect from the main characters?

50% Entry

- What has surprised you so far in the story and why?
- How would you describe the narrative tone and diction?
- Which themes are coming to the forefront and how?
- Which minor character could be identified as a foil for the protagonist and why?
- What is a symbol that stands out, and how does it affect your understanding of the story?

75% Entry

- What do you expect from the coming climax of the novel?
- Which character has changed the most and how?
- How does a secondary setting compare to the story's main locale?
- How does the novel's point of view affect our understanding of events?

Final Entry

- What is the ultimate impact of the novel and how is it achieved in the final section?
- Which example of foreshadowing can you identify from an earlier part of the story?
- How does this book compare to a similar text or historical event?
- How does your situated knowledge (age, background, worldview, etc) impact your reading of the text?
- Which theme is significantly developed in the final section and how?
- Are you more or less likely to read another book by this author? Why?

Evaluation of Assignment

In addition to obvious elements like spelling, punctuation, grammar, and length, your polished Analysis Journal entries will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- Responses address a variety of narrative techniques such as characterization, setting, plot, style, and theme. (In other words, don't address only characterization — write about a variety of topics.)
- Responses effectively communicate your understanding of key ideas and concepts present in the work.
- Responses provide depth of analysis, not surface-level reflection.
- Responses connect ideas and concepts to your life and understandings about humanity.

Glossary – Helpful for Understanding *Things Fall Apart*

abomination anything hateful and disgusting.

about sheep and goats / about wheat and tares Two frequently quoted teachings of Jesus relate to the need for separating the good from the bad. In one, he refers to separating the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:32); in the other, separating the wheat from the tares, or weeds (Matthew 13:30). Mr. Smith was obviously much concerned about dividing the community between the good (the Christian converts) and the bad (the traditional Igbo believers). Not coincidentally, his suspension of a convert is also based on a quotation from Matthew (9:17).

about ten thousand men The nine villages of Umuofia unlikely have as many as ten thousand men. This saying probably means every man of the community — an example of *hyperbole*, an exaggeration not intended to be taken literally.

agadi-nwayi an old woman.

Agbala do-o-o-o! . . . Ezinmao-o-o-o Chielo, the priestess, takes on the voice of the divine Agbala to ask for Ezinma to come to her.

Agbala, the Oracle the prophet of the Igbo. Achebe bases the Agbala Oracle (the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves) on the Awka Oracle that was destroyed by the British. Chielo was the priestess who spoke to Unoka on behalf of the god Agbala.

albino a person whose skin, hair, and eyes lack normal coloration because of genetic factors: albinos have a white skin, whitish hair, and pink eyes.

alligator pepper a small brown fruit of an African shrub, whose hot seeds are like black pepper; also called *offe*. The seeds may be ground and blended with kola nut in the ritual welcome of visitors.

Amadiora the god of thunder and lightning.

And these white men, they say, have no toes The white men's toes are hidden because they are wearing shoes.

Ani the earth goddess who owns all land.

anklet of his titles When a man achieves a title, he wears a special anklet to indicate his title. He may wear more than one anklet to indicate more titles.

Aru oyim de de de dei! egwugwu language translated as *greetings to the physical body of a friend*. The egwugwu speak in a formal language that is difficult for the Umuofians to understand. Each of the nine egwugwu represents a village of the Umuofian community. Together, the egwugwu form a tribunal to judge disputes.

The body of the white man, I salute you. The egwugwu speak indirectly, using a formal language of immortal spirits.

bride-price in some cultures, money and property given to a prospective bride's family by the prospective groom and his family.

bull-roarer a noisemaker made from a length of string or rawhide threaded through an object of wood, stone, pottery, or bone; a ritual device that makes a loud humming noise when swung rapidly overhead.

calabash the dried, hollow shell of a gourd, used as a bowl, cup, and so on.

callow young and inexperienced; immature.

cam wood a dye from a West African redwood tree that is used by women to redden their skins before decorating themselves with other patterns for special occasions.

cassava any of several plants (genus *Manihot* and especially *M. esculenta*) of the spurge family grown in the tropics for their fleshy, edible rootsticks that produce a nutritious starch. Here, the plant also provides valuable leaves for livestock feed as well as tubers, which are prepared like coco-yams.

caste rigid class distinction based on birth, wealth, and so on, operating as a social system or principle.

chalk a material that represents peace. The Umuofians use chalk to signify personal honors and status by marking the floor and the toe or face, according to the level of honorific title they have taken. For example, Okoye marks his toe to indicate his first title.

chi a significant cultural concept and belief meaning one's personal deity; also one's destiny or fate.

Chielo the name of the current priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves.

Chukwu the leading god in the Igbo hierarchy of gods.

coco-yam the edible, spherical-shaped tuber of the taro plant grown in the tropics and eaten like potatoes or ground into flour, cooked to a paste, or fermented for beer. Here, the round coco-yam (a woman's crop) is a different tuber than the elongated-shaped yam (a man's crop).

compound an enclosed space with a building or group of buildings within it.

court messengers the native Africans hired by the British to carry out their law enforcement activities; also called *kotma*. *Kotma* is a Pidgin English word derived from the words court and messenger.

cowries shells of the cowrie, a kind of mollusk related to snails and found in warm seas; especially the shells of the money cowrie, formerly used as currency in parts of Africa and southern Asia.

creepers plants whose stems put out tendrils or rootlets by which they can creep along a surface as they grow.

the D.C. the District Commissioner.

defecates excretes waste matter from the bowels.

desecrated to have taken away the sacredness of; treat as not sacred; profane.

efulefu worthless men in the eyes of the community.

egusi melon seeds prepared for a soup.

egwugwu leaders of the clan who wear masks during certain rituals and speak on behalf of the spirits; the term can be either singular or plural.

Eke day, Afo day The Igbo week has four days: Eke, Oye, Afo, and Nkwo.

ekwe a drum.

emissary a person or agent sent on a specific mission.

eneke-nti-oba a bird that flies endlessly.

entrails the inner organs of humans or animals; specifically, the intestines; viscera; guts.

esoteric intended for or understood by only a chosen few, as an inner group of disciples or initiates (said of ideas, literature, and so).

evangelism a preaching of, or zealous effort to spread, the gospel.

Evil Forest the name of the leader of the egwugwu; also the name of the forest where taboo objects and people are abandoned.

Eze elina, elina a favorite song of Ikemefuna's about how Danda the ant holds court and how the sand dances forever; it was introduced as a story at the end of Chapter 4.

Ezeugo the name for a person of high religious significance, such as an Igbo priest.

Ezinma Ekwefi and Okonkwo's daughter; meaning true beauty. She is also called Nma and Ezigbo, which mean the good one (child).

fetish any object believed by some person or group to have magical power.

Go-di-di-go-go-di-go. Di-go-go-di-go the sound of drumbeats on the *ekwe*, or drums.

a great medicine a supernatural power or magic that may take the shape of a person. In the Umuike market, the medicine assumes the shape of an old woman with a beckoning, magical fan.

a great queen Queen Victoria, reigning head of the British Empire for sixty-four years (1837-1901).

guttural loosely, produced in the throat; harsh, rasping, and so on.

gyre a circular or spiral motion; a revolution. The word appears in the book's opening quotation from a W.B. Yeats poem, "The Second Coming."

harbingers persons or things that come before to announce or give an indication of what follows; heralds.

harmattan a dry, dusty wind that blows from the Sahara in northern Africa toward the Atlantic, especially from November to March.

heathen anyone not a Jew, Christian, or Muslim; especially, a member of a tribe, nation, etc. worshiping many gods.

I am Dry-meat-that fills-the-mouth / I am Fire-that-burns-without-faggots two phrases suggesting that Evil Forest is all-powerful. Faggots are bundles of sticks for burning.

I cannot live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle. One must act according to one's fortune and circumstances; spittle is one's spit.

iba fever, probably related to malaria.

Ibo a member of a people of southeastern Nigeria; known for their art and their skills as traders. Today, the word is spelled *Igbo* (the *g* is not pronounced).

Idemili title This title, named after the river god Idemili, is the third-level title of honor in Umuofia.

Ikenga a carved wooden figure kept by every man in his shrine to symbolize the strength of a man's right hand.

ilo the village gathering place and playing field; an area for large celebrations and special events.

impudent shamelessly bold or disrespectful; saucy; insolent.

iron horse the bicycle that the white man was riding when he apparently got lost.

isa-ifi the ceremony in which the bride is judged to have been faithful to her groom.

It is female ochu. Crimes are divided into male and female types. Okonkwo's accidental killing of Ezeudu's son is considered manslaughter and therefore a female crime.

iyi-uwa a special stone linking an ogbanje child and the spirit world; The ogbanje is protected as long as the stone is not discovered and destroyed.

Jesu Kristi Jesus Christ.

jigida strings of hundreds of tiny beads worn snugly around the waist.

a just war Societies throughout history have rationalized certain wars as justified for religious or cultural reasons. For example, in the fifth century, St. Augustine of the early Christian church wrote extensively about the just war; the Crusades of the late Middle Ages were initiated as holy wars; and today's Muslim word *jihad* means holy war.

kernels the inner, softer part of a nut, fruit pit, etc. Here, found in the fleshy remains of the palm nut after its husk is crushed for palm-oil. The kernels can be processed by machine for the extraction of a very fine oil.

kites birds of prey with long, pointed wings and, usually, a forked tail; they prey especially on insects, reptiles, and small mammals.

kola nut the seed of the cola, an African tree. The seed contains caffeine and yields an extract; it represents vitality and is used as a courteous, welcoming snack, often with alligator pepper.

leprosy a progressive infectious disease caused by a bacterium that attacks the skin, flesh, nerves, and so on; it is characterized by nodules, ulcers, white scaly scabs, deformities, and the eventual loss of sensation, and is apparently communicated only after long and close contact.

making inyanga flaunting or showing off.

markets Igbo weeks are four days long, and the market day is on the first of day each week; therefore, three or four markets is a period of twelve to sixteen days.

Mbaino This community name means *four settlements*.

Mbanta The name means small town and is where Okonkwo's mother comes from, his motherland, beyond the borders of Mbaino (Ikemefuna's original home).

monkey tricks possibly a racial slur directed at the natives.

ndichie elders.

the new dispensation the new system; the new organization of society under British influence.

Nna-ayi translated as *our father*; a greeting of respect.

nso-ani a sin against the earth goddess, Ani.

the nuts of the water of heaven hailstones.

nza a small but aggressive bird.

obi a hut within a compound.

ogbanje a child possessed by an evil spirit that leaves the child's body upon death only to enter into the mother's womb to be reborn again within the next child's body.

Ogbuefi a person with a high title, as in Ogbuefi Ezeugo (the orator) and Ogbuefi Udo (the man whose wife was killed in Mbaino).

ogene a gong.

ogwu medicine, magic.

Okonkwo The name implies male pride and stubbornness.

Okoye an everyman name comparable to John Doe in English. Okoye represents all the people to whom Unoka owes money.

Oracle the place where, or medium by which, the deities are consulted; here, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves.

ostracize to banish, bar, exclude, etc. from a group through rejection by general consent of the members.

osu a class of people in Igbo culture considered outcasts, not fit to associate with free-born members of the clan.

Osugo The name means a low-ranked person.

ozo a class of men holding an ozo title; it also refers to the ritual which accompanies the granting of a title to a person.

palaver a conference or discussion, as originally between African natives and European explorers or traders.

palm fronds leaves of a palm tree. Here, they are tied together in clusters for "beating the ground" or the legs and feet of the pushing crowd.

pestle a tool, usually club-shaped, used to pound or grind substances in a mortar, or very hard bowl.

plantain a hybrid banana plant that is widely cultivated in the Western Hemisphere.

prophets of Baal Mr. Smith is comparing the pagan worship of the warrior god Baal, mentioned in the Old Testament (I Kings 18) to the Igbo religion. The Israelites saw the worship of Baal as a rival to their worship of God, causing the prophet Elijah to challenge the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

python a very large, nonvenomous snake of Asia, Africa, and Australia, that squeezes its prey to death.

raffia 1) a palm tree of Madagascar, with large, pinnate leaves. 2) fiber from its leaves, used as string or woven into baskets, hats, and so on.

resolute having or showing a fixed, firm purpose; determined; resolved; unwavering.

sacrament of Holy Communion the most sacred ritual of participating Christians.

saltpeter potassium nitrate; used in the preparation of snuff (also in gunpowder and fireworks).

sharecropping working land for a share of the crop, especially as a tenant farmer. Here, Okonkwo works as a sharecropper to obtain seed-yams.

silk-cotton tree any of several large, tropical, trees (genera *Bombax* and *Ceiba*) of the bombax family that have capsular fruits with silky hairs around the seeds. Here, the tree is revered because it contains spirits of good children as yet unborn.

singlets men's undershirts, especially the sleeveless kind.

snuff a preparation of powdered tobacco that is inhaled by sniffing, is chewed, or is rubbed on the gums.

superfluous being more than is needed, useful, or wanted; surplus; excessive.

taboo any social prohibition or restriction that results from convention or tradition.

tie-tie a vine used like a rope; from Pidgin English *to tie*.

Tufia-a! This sound represents spitting and cursing simultaneously.

twenty and ten years Igbo counting may not have a unique number for thirty, which is thus counted as twenty and ten. Similarly, in French, seventy is counted as sixty-ten, and eighty is four twenties.

twins two born at the same birth. Here, according to Igbo custom, twins are considered evil and must be placed in earthenware pots and left to die in the forest.

Udo peace.

udu a clay pot.

uli a liquid made from seeds that make the skin pucker; used for temporary tattoo-like decorations.

umuada daughters who have married outside the clan.

umunna the extended family and kinsmen.

umunna the extended family, the clan.

Umuofia kwenu a shout of approval and greeting that means *United Umuofia!*

Umuofia The community name, which means *children of the forest* and *a land undisturbed by European influences*.

Unoka Okonkwo's father's name; its translation, *home is supreme*, implies a tendency to stay home and loaf instead of achieve fame and heroism.

a war of blame In Chapter 2, the villagers state that a "fight of blame" (which Okonkwo expects the peacemakers to label this fight against the strangers) would never be sanctioned by their Oracle, which approves only a "just war." Therefore, what Okonkwo is considering may go beyond even the clan's traditions — a fight for which they may not have full justification from their gods.

Week of Peace In Umuofia, a sacred week in which violence is prohibited.

wherewithal that with which something can be done; necessary means.

Who is the chief among you? The kotma (court messenger) guards see by the anklets that all six leaders own titles and joke that they must not be worth much.

yam foo-foo pounded and mashed yam pulp.

yam pottage a watery gruel made of yams.

Yes, sah *Yes sir*; the form may be Pidgin English and illustrates how the native-born court messengers submitted to the orders of their white bosses — at least on the surface.

***Things Fall Apart* Introduction**

The story of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* takes place in the Nigerian village of Umuofia in the late 1880s, before missionaries and other outsiders have arrived. The Ibo clan practices common tribal traditions—worship of gods, sacrifice, communal living, war, and magic. Leadership is based on a man's personal worth and his contribution to the good of the tribe. Okonkwo stands out as a great leader of the Ibo tribe. Tribesmen respect Okonkwo for his many achievements.

Even though the tribe reveres Okonkwo, he must be punished for his accidental shooting of a young tribesman. The Ibo ban Okonkwo from the clan for seven years. Upon his return to the village, Okonkwo finds a tribe divided by the influence of missionaries and English bureaucrats who have interrupted the routine of tradition. Only when Okonkwo commits the ultimate sin against the tribe does the tribe come back together to honor custom.

Critics appreciate Achebe's development of the conflict that arises when tradition clashes with change. He uses his characters and their unique language to portray the double tragedies that occur in the story. Readers identify not only with Okonkwo and his personal hardships but also with the Ibo culture and its disintegration. Chinua Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* not for his fellow Nigerians, but for people beyond his native country. He wanted to explain the truth about the effects of losing one's culture. Published in 1958, the book was not widely read by Nigerians or by Africans in general. When Nigeria became independent in 1960, however, Africans appreciated the novel for its important contribution to Nigerian history.

Author Information

Chinua Achebe is a world-renowned scholar recognized for his ability to write simply, yet eloquently, about life's universal qualities. His writing weaves together history and fiction to produce a literary broadcloth that offers visions of people enduring real life. Critics appreciate his just and realistic treatment of his topics.

Achebe writes primarily about his native Africa, where he was born Albert Chinualumogu Achebe in 1930. He grew up in Ogidi, Nigeria, one of the first centers of Anglican missionary work in Eastern Nigeria. His father and mother, Isaiah and Janet Achebe, were missionary teachers. Achebe's life as a Christian and member of the Ibo tribe enables him to create realistic depictions of both contemporary and pre-colonized Africa. He blends his knowledge of Western political ideologies and Christian doctrine with folklore, proverbs, and idioms from his native tribe to produce stories of African culture that are intimate and authentic.

Achebe left the village of Ogidi to attend Government College in Umuahia, and later, University College in Ibadan. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree from University College in 1953. He worked first for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation as a writer and continued radio work in various capacities until 1966, when he resigned from his post as Director of External Broadcasting. Dissatisfied with the political climate that would later prompt the Biafran War, he began traveling abroad and lectured as the appointed Senior Research Fellow for the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Continuing his teaching career, Achebe accepted a position with the University of Massachusetts, Amherst in 1972. He was a visiting Professor of English at that institution until 1976 and again in 1987-1988. He also spent a year as a visiting professor at the University of Connecticut. In the intervening years, Achebe returned to his native country to teach at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Achebe has written extensively throughout his adult life. His numerous articles, novels, short stories, essays, and children's books have earned prestigious awards. For example, his book of poetry *Christmas in Biafra* was a winner of the first Commonwealth Poetry Prize. His novels *Arrow of God* and *Anthills of the Savannah* won, respectively, the New Statesman-Jock Campbell Award and finalist for the 1987 Booker Prize in England.

Achebe continues to write and participate in scholarly activities throughout the world, while making his home in Annandale, New York, with his wife, Christie. They have four children and teach at Bard College.

To learn more about Achebe, consult the Featured Article entry on Wikipedia. Mr. Piotrowski wrote 95% of it!

STYLE

Tragedy

Things Fall Apart chronicles the double tragedies of the deaths of Okonkwo, a revered warrior, and the Ibo, the tribe to which Okonkwo belongs. In literature, tragedy often describes the downfall of a great individual which is caused by a flaw in the person's character. Okonkwo's personal flaw is his unreasonable anger, and his tragedy occurs when the tribe bans him for accidentally killing a young tribesman, and he returns to find a tribe that has changed beyond recognition. The Ibo's public demise results from the destruction of one culture by another, but their tragedy is caused by their turning away from their tribal gods.

Setting

Things Fall Apart is set in Umuofia, a tribal village in the country of Nigeria, in Africa. It is the late 1800s, when English bureaucrats and missionaries are first arriving in the area. There is a long history of conflict between European colonists and the Africans they try to convert and subjugate. But by placing the novel at the beginning of the period Achebe can accentuate the clash of cultures that are just coming into contact. It also sets up a greater contrast between the time Okonkwo leaves the tribe and the time he returns, when his village is almost unrecognizable to him because of the changes brought by the English.

Conflict

In *Things Fall Apart*, the Ibo thrive in Umuofia, practicing ancient rituals and customs.

When the white man arrives, however, he ignores the Ibo's values and tries to enforce his own beliefs, laws, and religious practices. Some of the weaker tribesmen join the white man's ranks, leaving gaps in the clan's united front. First, the deserters are impressed with the wealth the white man brings into Umuofia. Second, they find in the white man's religion an acceptance and brotherhood that has never been afforded them due to their lower status in the tribe. As men leave the tribe to become members of the white man's mission, the rift in the tribe widens. Social and psychological conflict abounds as brothers turn their backs on one another, and fathers and sons become strangers.

Narration

Achebe develops *Things Fall Apart* through a third-person narrative—using "he" and "she" for exposition—rather than having the characters tell it themselves. Often speaking in the past tense, he also narrates the story with little use of character dialogue. The resulting story reads like an oral tale that has been passed down through generations of storytellers.

Imagery

While the characters in *Things Fall Apart* have little dialogue, the reader still has a clear image of them and is able to understand their motives. Achebe accomplishes this through his combination of the English language with Ibo vocabulary and proverbs. When the characters do talk, they share the rich proverbs that are "the palm-oil with which words are eaten." Achebe uses the proverbs not only to illustrate his characters but also to paint pictures of the society he is depicting, to reveal themes, and to develop conflict. Vivid images result, giving the reader a clear representation of people and events.

Point of View

Critics praise Achebe for his adept shifts in point of view in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe begins the story from Okonkwo's point of view. Okonkwo's story helps the reader understand the Ibo's daily customs and rituals as well as celebrations for the main events in life: birth, marriage, and death. As the story progresses, however, it becomes more the clan's story than Okonkwo's personal story. The reader follows the clan's life, gradual disintegration, and

death. The novel becomes one of situation rather than character; the reader begins to feel a certain sympathy for the tribe instead of the individual. The final shift occurs when

Achebe ends the story from the District Commissioner's viewpoint while some critics feel that Achebe's ending lectures, others believe that it strengthens the conclusion for the reader. Some even view it as a form of functionalism, an African tradition of cultural instruction.

Plot and Structure

Divided into three parts, *Things Fall Apart* comprises many sub stories. Yet Achebe holds the various stories together through his use of proverbs, traditional oral tales, and *leitmotif*, or recurring images or phrases. Ibo proverbs occur throughout the book, providing a unity to the surface progression of the story. For example, "when a man says yes, his chi says yes" IS the proverb the tribe applies to Okonkwo's success, on the one hand, but IS also the proverb Okonkwo, himself, applies to his failure. Traditional oral tales always contain a tale within the tale. Nwoye's mother is an expert at telling these tales-morals embedded in stories. The stories Achebe tells throughout *Things Fall Apart* are themselves tales within the tale. *Leitmotif* is the association of a repeated theme with a particular Idea. Achebe connects masculinity with land, yams, titles, and wives. He repeatedly associates this view of masculinity with a certain stagnancy in Umuofia. While a traditional Western plot may not be evident in *Things Fall Apart*, a definite structure with an African flavor lends itself to the overall unity of the story

Foil

Achebe uses foil-a type of contrast-to strengthen his primary characters in *Things Fall Apart*, illuminating their differences. The following pairs of characters serve as foils for each other: Okonkwo and Obierika, Ikemefuna and Nwoye, and Mr. Brown and the Reverend Smith. Okonkwo rarely thinks; he is a man of action. He follows the tribe's customs almost blindly and values its opinion of him over his own good sense. Obierika, on the other hand, ponders the things that happen to Okonkwo and his tribe. Obierika often makes his own decisions and wonders about the tribe's wisdom in some of its actions. Ikemefuna exemplifies the rising young tribesman. A masculine youth, full of energy and personality, Ikemefuna participates in the manly activities expected of him. In contrast, Nwoye appears lazy and effeminate. He prefers listening to his mother's stories over making plans for war. He detests the sight of blood and abhors violence of any kind. Mr. Brown speaks gently and restrains the overzealous members of his mission from overwhelming the clan. He seeks to win the people over by offering education and sincere faith. The Reverend Smith is the fire-and-brimstone preacher who replaces Mr. Brown. He sees the world in black and white; either something is evil, or it is good. He thrives on the converts' zeal and encourages them to do whatever it takes to gain supporters for his cause.

THEMES

Custom and Tradition

Okonkwo's struggle to live up to what he perceives as "traditional" standards of masculinity, and his failure to adapt to a changing world, help point out the importance of custom and tradition in the novel. The Ibo tribe defines itself through the age-old traditions it practices in *Things Fall Apart*. While some habits mold tribe members' daily lives, other customs are reserved for special ceremonies. For example, the head of a household honors any male guest by praying over and sharing a kola nut with him, offering the guest the privilege of breaking the nut. They drink palm-wine together, with the oldest person taking the first drink after the provider has tasted it.

Ceremonial customs are more elaborate. The Feast of the New Yam provides an illustration. This Feast gives the tribe an opportunity to thank Am, the earth goddess and source of all fertility. Preparations for the Feast include thorough hut-cleaning and decorating, cooking, body painting, and head shaving. Relatives come from great distances to partake in the feast and to drink palm-wine. Then, on the second day of the celebration, the great wrestling match IS held. The entire village meets in the village playground, or Ilo, for the drinking, dancing, and wrestling. The festival continues through the night until the final round is won. Because the tribe views winning a match as a great achievement, the winner earns the tribe's ongoing respect.

Tribal custom dictates every aspect of members' lives. The tribe determines a man's worth by the number of titles he holds, the number of wives he acquires, and the number of yams he grows. The tribe acknowledges a man's very being by the gods' approval of him. Without custom and tradition, the tribe does not exist.

Choices and Consequences

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo makes a choice early in life to overcome his father's legacy, as a result, Okonkwo gains the tribe's respect through his constant hard work. The tribe rewards Okonkwo by recognizing his achievements and honoring him as a great warrior. The tribe believes that Okonkwo's personal god, or chi, is good (fate has blessed him). Nevertheless, they realize that Okonkwo has worked hard to achieve all that he has (if a man says yes, his chi says yes). When he breaks the Week of Peace, however, the tribe believes that Okonkwo has begun to feel too self-important and has challenged his chi. They fear the consequences his actions may bring.

The tribe decides to kill Ikemefuna. Even though Ezeudu warns Okonkwo not to be a part of the plan, Okonkwo himself kills Ikemefuna. Okonkwo chooses to kill the boy rather than to appear weak.

When Okonkwo is in exile, he ponders the tribe's view of his chi. He thinks that maybe they have been wrong—that his chi was not made for great things. Okonkwo blames his exile on his chi. He refuses to accept that his actions have led him to this point. He sees no connections among his breaking the Week of Peace, his killing Ikemefuna, and his shooting Ezeudu's son. In Okonkwo's eyes, his troubles result from ill fate and chance.

Alienation and Loneliness

Okonkwo's exile isolates him from all he has ever known in *Things Fall Apart*. The good name he had built for himself with his tribesmen is a thing of the past. He must start anew. The thought overwhelms him, and Okonkwo feels nothing but despair. Visits from his good friend, Obierika, do little to cheer Okonkwo. News of the white man's intrusion and the tribe's reactions to it disturb him.

His distance from the village, and his lack of connection to it, give him a sense of helplessness. Even worse, Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, joins the white man's mission efforts.

Okonkwo's return to the village does nothing to lessen his feelings of alienation and loneliness. The tribe he rejoins is not the same tribe he left. While he does not expect to be received as the respected warrior he once was, he does think that his arrival will prompt an occasion to be remembered. When the clan takes no special notice of his return, Okonkwo realizes that the white man has been too successful in his efforts to change the tribe's ways. Okonkwo grieves the loss of his tribe and the life he once knew. He is not able to overcome his sense of complete alienation.

Betrayal

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo feels betrayed by his personal god, or chi, which has allowed Okonkwo to produce a son who is effeminate. Nwoye continually disappoints Okonkwo. As a child, Nwoye prefers his mother's stories to masculine pursuits. As an adult, Nwoye joins the white missionaries.

Okonkwo also feels betrayed by his clan. He does not understand why his fellow tribesmen have not stood up against the white intruders. When Okonkwo returns from exile, his clan has all but disintegrated. Many of the tribe's leaders have joined the missionaries' efforts; tribal beliefs and customs are being ignored. Okonkwo mourns the death of the strong tribe he once knew and despises the "woman-like" tribe that has taken its place.

Change and Transformation

The tribe to which Okonkwo returns has undergone a complete transformation during his absence in *Things Fall Apart*. The warlike Ibo once looked to its elders for guidance, made sacrifices to gods for deliverance, and solved conflicts through confrontation. Now the Ibo are "woman-like"; they discuss matters among themselves and pray to

a god they can not see. Rather than immediately declare war on the Christians when Enoch unmask the egwugwu, or ancestral spirit, the Ibo only destroy Enoch's compound. Okonkwo realizes how completely the Christians have changed his tribe when the tribesmen allow the remaining court messengers to escape after Okonkwo beheads one of them.

Good and Evil

Many of the tribesmen view the white man as evil in *Things Fall Apart*. Tribesmen did not turn their backs on one another before the white man came. Tribesmen would never have thought to kill their own brothers before the white man came. The arrival of the white man has forced the clan to act in ways that its ancestors deplore. Such evil has never before invaded the clan.

Culture Clash

The arrival of the white man and his culture heralds the death of the Ibo culture in *Things Fall Apart*. The white man does not honor the tribe's customs and strives to convince tribesmen that the white man's ways are better. Achieving some success, the white man encourages the tribesmen who join him, increasing the white man's ranks. As a result, the tribe IS split, pitting brother against brother and father against son. Tribal practices diminish as the bond that ties tribesmen deteriorates. Death eventually comes to the weaker of the clashing cultures.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Tribal Society

Things Fall Apart was published in 1958 just prior to Nigerian independence, but it depicts pre-colonial Africa. Achebe felt it was important to portray Nigerians as they really were-not just provide a shallow description of them as other authors had. The story takes place in the typical tribal village of Umuofia, where the inhabitants (whom Achebe calls the Ibo, but who are also known as the Igbo) practice rituals common to their native traditions.

The Ibo worshipped gods who protect, advise, and chastise them and who are represented by priests and priestesses within the clan. For example, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves grants knowledge and wisdom to those who are brave enough to consult him. No one has ever seen the Oracle except his priestess, who is an Ibo woman who has special powers of her own. Not only did the gods advise the Ibo on community matters, but also they guided individuals. Each person had a personal god, or chi, that directed his or her actions. A strong chi meant a strong person; people with weak chis were pitied. Each man kept a separate hut, or shrine, where he stored the symbols of his personal god and his ancestral spirits.

A hunting and gathering society, the Ibo existed on vegetables, with yams as the primary crop. Yams were so important to them that the Ibo celebrated each new year with the Feast of the New Yam. This festival thanked Ani, the earth goddess and source of all fertility. The Ibo prepared for days for the festival, and the celebration itself lasted for two days. Yams also played a part in determining a man's status in the tribe-the more yams a man has, the higher his status. Trade with other villages was facilitated by small seashells called cowries which were used as a form of currency.

Within the village, people were grouped according to families, with the eldest man in the family having the most power. On matters affecting the whole village, an assembly of adult men debated courses of action, and men could influence these assemblies by purchasing "titles" from the tribal elders. This system encouraged hard work and the spread of wealth. People who transgressed against the laws and customs of the village had to confront the egwugwu, an assembly of tribesmen masked as spirits, who would settle disputes and hand out punishment. Individual villages also attained various degrees of political status. In the novel, other tribes respect and fear Umuofia. They believe that Umuofia's magic is powerful and that the village's war-medicine, or agadi-nwayi, is particularly potent. Neighboring clans always try to settle disputes peacefully with Umuofia to avoid having to war with them.

Christianity and Colonization

While Christianity spread across North and South Africa as early as the late fifteenth century, Christianity took its strongest hold when the majority of the missionaries arrived in the late 1800s. After centuries of taking slaves out of Africa, Britain had outlawed the slave trade and now saw the continent as ripe for colonization. Missionaries sent to convert the local population were often the first settlers. They believed they could atone for the horrors of slavery by saving the souls of Africans.

At first, Africans were mistrustful of European Christians, and took advantage of the education the missionaries provided without converting. Individuals who had no power under the current tribal order, however, soon converted; in the novel, the missionaries who come to Umuofia convert only the weaker tribesmen, or *efulefu*. Missionaries would convince these tribesmen that their tribe worshipped false gods and that its false gods did not have the ability to punish them if they chose to join the mission. When the mission and its converts accepted even the outcasts of the clan, the missionaries' ranks grew. Eventually, some of the more important tribesmen would convert. As the mission expanded, the clan divided, discontent simmered, and conflicts arose.

English Bureaucrats and Colonization

After the arrival of the British, when conflicts came up between villages the white government would intervene instead of allowing villagers to settle them themselves. In the novel, a white District Commissioner brings with him court messengers whose duty it is to bring in people who break the white man's law. The messengers, called "Ashy-Buttocks" for the ash-colored shorts they wear, are hated for their high-handed attitudes. These messengers and interpreters were often African Christian converts who looked down on tribesmen who still followed traditional customs. If violence involved any white missionaries or bureaucrats, British soldiers would often slaughter whole villages instead of seeking and punishing guilty individuals. The British passed an ordinance in 1912 that legalized this practice, and during an uprising in 1915, British troops killed more than forty natives in retaliation for one dead and one wounded British soldier.

One of the most important results of Europe's colonization of Africa was the division of Africa into at least fifty nation-states. Rather than being a part of a society determined by common language and livelihood, Africans lived according to political boundaries. The divisions often split ethnic groups, leading to tension and sometimes violence. The cohesiveness of the traditional society was gone.

Nigerian Independence

British colonial rule in Nigeria lasted only fifty-seven years, from 1903 to 1960. Although Nigerians had long called for self-rule, it was not until the end of World War II that England began heeding these calls. The Richards Constitution of 1946 was the first attempt to grant some native rule by bringing the diverse peoples of Nigeria under one representative government. The three regions (northern, southern and western) were brought under the administration of one legislative council composed of twenty-eight Nigerians and seventeen British officers. Regional councils, however, guaranteed some independence from the national council and forged a link between local authorities, such as tribal chiefs, and the national government. There were three major tribes (the Hausa, the Yoruba and the Igbo) and more than eight smaller ones living in Nigeria. This diversity complicated the creation of a unified Nigeria. Between 1946 and 1960 the country went through several different constitutions, each one attempting to balance power between the regional and the national bodies of government.

On October 1, 1960, Nigeria attained full status as a sovereign state and a member of the British Commonwealth. But under the Constitution of 1960 the Queen of England was still the head of state. She remained the commander-in-chief of Nigeria's armed forces, and the Nigerian navy operated as part of Britain's Royal Navy. Nigerians felt frustrated by the implication that they were the subjects of a monarch living over 4,000 miles away. In 1963, five years after the publication of Achebe's novel, a new constitution would replace the British monarch with a Nigerian president as head of state in Nigeria.

Literary Traditions

Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* just before Nigeria received its independence. He intended the book for audiences outside Africa; he wanted to paint a true picture of pre-colonial Africa for those people who had no direct knowledge of traditional African societies. As a result of the Nigerians' acquisition of independence, the Nigerian educational system sought to encourage a national pride through the study of Nigerian heritage. The educational system required Achebe's book in high schools throughout the English-speaking countries in Africa. The book was well received. Chinua Achebe has been recognized as "the most original African novelist writing in English," according to Charles Larson in *The Emergence of African Fiction*. Critics throughout the world have praised *Things Fall Apart* as the first African English language classic.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Things Fall Apart has experienced a huge success. Since it was published in 1958, the book has sold more than two million copies in over thirty languages. Critics attribute its success not only to the book's message, but also to Achebe's talents as a writer. Achebe believes that stories should serve a purpose; they should deliver a meaningful message to the people who hear or read them. When Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*, his intent was to explain the beginnings of the turmoil Africans have been experiencing over the past century. He wanted to describe the integrity of pre-colonial Nigeria, detail the effects of colonialism on tribal societies, and reveal the lands of immoral treatment that people in modern society are often made to suffer. Critics agree that he accomplished all of these purposes. They feel that he writes honestly about tribal life and the colonial legacy. They also believe that Achebe delivers another important message: man will always face change, and he who can accommodate change will survive.

While some readers will view Okonkwo's deterioration and demise as a tragic result of his going against the will of the gods, others see the new "world order" as inevitable. Okonkwo's acts do not bring the tribe to an end; it is the tribe's lack of adaptability that destroys it. These opposing interpretations strengthen the impact of the book. In *The Growth of the African Novel*, Eustace Palmer states that "while deploring the imperialists' brutality and condescension, [Achebe] seems to suggest that change is inevitable and wise men... reconcile themselves to accommodating change. It is the diehards... who resist and are destroyed in the process."

Achebe successfully communicates his message through skillful writing. From the time critics first read his book, they have concurred that Achebe's craftsmanship earns him a place among the best writers in the world. An example of his craftsmanship is Achebe's ability to convey the essence of traditional Nigeria while borrowing from the conventions of the European novel. He was the first Nigerian writer to adapt African oral tradition to novel form. In doing so, "he created a new novel that possesses its own autonomy and transcends the limits set by both his African and European teachers," as Kofi Awoonor observes in *The Breast of the Earth*. The borrowed European elements Achebe contrasts are communal life over the individual character and the beauty and detail of traditional tribal life over brief references to background. His descriptions of day-to-day life and special ceremonial customs provide a "powerful presentation of the beauty, strength, and validity of traditional life and values," as Palmer observes.

Literary experts also point out Achebe's ability to combine language forms, maintain thematic unity, and shape conflict in *Things Fall Apart*. His use of Ibo proverbs in conjunction with the English language places the reader in Africa with the Ibo tribe. Adnan A. Roscoe explains in his book *Mother Is Gold: A Study of West African literature*, "Proverbs are cherished by Achebe's people as tribal heirlooms, the treasure boxes of their cultural heritage." In addition, the combination of languages helps reiterate the theme of tradition versus change. Roscoe goes on to say, "Through [proverbs] traditions are received and handed on; and when they disappear or fall into disuse... it is a sign that a particular tradition, or indeed a whole way of life, is passing away."

The death of the language then, a powerful cultural tradition, signifies the ultimate discord in the novel—the fall of one culture to another. G. D. Killam observes in *The Novels of Chinua Achebe* that "the conflict in the novel, vested in Okonkwo, derives from the series of crushing blows which are leveled at traditional values by an alien and more powerful culture causing, in the end, the traditional society to fall apart" Achebe's mastery of content and his talent as a writer contribute to his worldwide success with this novel as well as his other novels, articles, poems, and essays. As Killam concludes, his writing conveys that "the spirit of man and the belief in the possibility of triumph endures."

Critical Essay #1

In the following excerpt, Sarr explores Achebe's novel Things Fall Apart from a cultural perspective.

Written about the past of Africa by a novelist who sees himself as a "teacher," *Things Fall Apart* encompasses several worlds, several experiences, sometimes complex, all altered or mixed. Achebe is never a mere reporter of public events. Talking of *Things Fall Apart*, he said: "I now know that my first book was an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son" [Achebe in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, Heinemann, 1975]. The past that Chinua Achebe describes so beautifully in *Things Fall Apart* is a past that Achebe himself had to rediscover. It is a past that was largely lost as a result of twentieth-century Europeanization. This rediscovery of the suppressed past IS an act of faith and religious revival. Achebe, like the majority of African writers today, wants his writings to be functional, to serve as oral literature did in traditional Africa, reflecting the totality of actual experience. As David Cook tells us:

Close study of a passage from *Things Fall Apart* out of context is particularly likely to lead to pedantic fault-finding and to have little relation to the full impact the novel makes upon us since . . . the achievement of this work is essentially an epic achievement in which the whole is greater than the parts and in which the parts cannot be appreciated properly when separated from the whole. [*African Literature. A Critical View*, by David Cook, Longman, 1977]

John Mbiti similarly sees the holistic and communal nature of African culture in his statement: "I am because we are and since we are therefore I character, and it is difficult not to side with Nwoye in rebelling against this act. Nevertheless, Igbo history does not seem so different from that of the British who think they are civilizing the natives. A form of the principle of an eye for an eye is involved in Mbaino's giving Mbanta a young virgin and a young man to replace the "daughter of Mbanta" killed in Mbaino. It is the Old Testament principle cast in a more flexible and gentler mold, for the killing of Ikemefuna is dependent on the Oracle and thus is not, like the Old Testament law, inevitable. Further, the sacrifices of the virgin to replace the lost wife and of the young boy become a way to "avoid war and bloodshed" while still protecting one's tribe from injustices against it. Achebe, then, see this to depict this episode in terms which relate it to the development of the British, while also sympathizing with the impulses to change in Obierika and with the revulsion of Nwoye against the sacrifice which to him is so like the abandonment of twins in the Evil Forest The sacrifice of the virgin, of course, is also a reminder of the sacrifices of young virgins in the classical literature which is so basic a part of the British heritage....

Although Achebe depicts the treachery and ignorance and intolerance of the British, he does not represent the Europeans as wholly evil. Both the Igbo and the British cultures are for Achebe a mixture of types of human beings. Okonkwo and Mr. Smith are warrior types who will not compromise when their own cultures are threatened. Okonkwo favors fighting the Christians when in Abame one of them kills the sacred python, and he favors war with the Christians in Umuofia. In the end he cuts down the court messengers who come to disband the meeting in Umuofia. Likewise, the Reverend James is against compromise: "He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness."

Mr. Brown, on the other hand, is more like Akunna or Oblenka. He and Akulilia are willing to learn about the other's beliefs even if they are not converted to them. He and Obierika are thoughtful defenders of their own cultures. Mr. Brown recognizes the difficulty with a frontal

attack on the Ibos' religion, and so he favors compromise and accommodation. Obierika realizes that if Umuofia kills the Christians, the soldiers from Umuru will annihilate the village.

Achebe's novel, then, depicts for both Africans and Americans the actual and potential sources of modern Nigerian dignity. *Things Fall Apart* suggests that the perennial human types recur in all cultures and that all effective civilizations must learn to deal with those types. Revealing the Igbo ability in pre-colonial times to incorporate the variety of humans in a well-functioning culture, Achebe refers his Igbo society to a series of standards which both Africans and Americans can seek as goals—a degree of redistribution of wealth, a combining of male and female principles, compelling art and poetry and music, tolerance, democracy, morality, a sound system of justice and, perhaps most important, the capacity for meaningful change. Lending veracity to his depiction of Igbo history by remaining clear-sighted about cultural weaknesses which need correction, Achebe depicts a worthy precursor of a healthy and just modern civilization.

Source: Akers Rhoads, "Culture in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," in *The African Studies Review*, Vol. 26, No.2, September, 1993, pp. 61-72.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Bennett, a doctoral candidate at the University of California-Santa Barbara, examines how issues of history, culture, and gender have affected Achebe's Things Fall Apart, and how the novel is valuable both as a literary work and an introduction to African literature.

As the most widely read work of African fiction, *Things Fall Apart* has played an instrumental role in introducing African literature to readers throughout the world. In particular, Achebe's fiction has contributed to world literature by retelling African history, as well as the history of European colonization, from an Afro-centric perspective rather than a Euro-centric one. By shifting the narrative focus from the perspective of the colonizer to the perspective of the colonized, Achebe's novels reveal and correct many of the biased assumptions found in previous historical and literary descriptions of Africa. Specifically, they reaffirm the value of African cultures by representing their rich and complex cultural traditions instead of stereotyping them as irrational and primitive. As Achebe explains in his frequently quoted essay, "The Novelist as Teacher," his novels seek to teach Africans that "their past—with all its imperfections—was not one night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them." To say that Achebe affirms African culture and history, however, is not to imply that he simply inverts European ethnocentrism by romanticizing African culture as perfect or vilifying European cultures as entirely corrupt. Instead, Achebe presents a remarkably balanced view of how all cultures encompass both good and bad dimensions.

In addition to re-interpreting African culture and history from an African perspective, *Things Fall Apart* is also significant because of its mastery of literary conventions. In fact, many critics argue that it is the best African novel ever written, and they specifically praise its sophisticated development of character, tragedy, and irony. Okonkwo, in particular, is a complex character, and consequently there are many ways to interpret his role in the novel. On one level, he can be interpreted psychologically in terms of the oedipal struggle that he has with his father and the very different oedipal struggle that his son, Nwoye, has with him. As each son rejects the

example of his father, these three generations form a reactionary cycle that Ironically repeats itself: when Nwoye rejects Okonkwo's masculinity, he ironically returns to the more feminine disposition that Okonkwo originally rejected in his father. Many of the major events of the novel, including both Okonkwo's tragic drive to succeed and Nwoye's eventual conversion to Christianity, largely result from the inter-generational struggle created when each son rejects his father.

Another way to analyze the psychological dimensions of Okonkwo's character is to examine how he constructs his sense of gender by asserting a strong sense of masculinity and repressing any sense of femininity. Just as there is an external psychological conflict between Okonkwo and his father, there is also an internal psychological conflict between the masculine and feminine sides within Okonkwo. While Okonkwo's hyper-masculinity initially enables him to achieve success as a great wrestler and warrior, his refusal to balance this masculine side with feminine virtues eventually contributes to his later destruction. At virtually every turn in the novel, his excessive masculinity nudges him toward new troubles. Because of his contempt for unmanliness, he rudely insults Osugo, destroys his relationship with his own son Nwoye, and lets himself be pressured into sacrificing Ikemefuna in spite of Ezeudu's warning. Moreover, Okonkwo's lack of respect for women is equally pervasive and problematic. He ignores the wisdom found in women's stories, he frequently intimidates and beats his wives, and he can only relate to his daughter Ezinma because he thinks of her as a boy. Consequently, Okonkwo is a man out of balance who has only developed one half of his full self because he only accepts the masculine side of his culture.

In addition to noting how gender influences Okonkwo's behavior within the story, many critics also note that gender influences Achebe as an author. Feminist critics, in particular, have criticized *Things Fall Apart* both for suggesting that men are representative of all Africans and for focusing too exclusively on masculine activities and male characters. Though it is perhaps inevitable that Achebe would write his novel from a male perspective, these critics raise interesting questions about how Achebe's male perspective might ignore and first represent the experiences of African women. Nevertheless, despite Achebe's male bias, there are moments in the novel when Achebe emphasizes female characters and valorizes their perspectives. It is the women who pass on many of the cultural traditions through stories, and it is Okonkwo's daughter, Ezinma, not his son, Nwoye, who understands Okonkwo in the end. Moreover, Okonkwo's wife, Kefir, shows more courage and parental love in defending the life of her daughter, Ezinma, than Okonkwo does in participating in the sacrifice of Ikemefuna. Consequently, even though Achebe might emphasize male characters and perspectives, he does not simply represent men as superior to women. In fact, there are many ways in which Achebe critiques Okonkwo's inflated sense of masculinity.

Another way to interpret Okonkwo's character is to focus less on his internal personality and look instead at how this personality is shaped by the various social and historical contexts in which he lives. From such a perspective, *Things Fall Apart* does not explore oedipal conflicts or gender identity as much as it explores the tension between pursuing individual desires and conforming to the community's values and customs. In many ways, Okonkwo's tragic death results directly from his inability to balance these competing demands of individuality and community. At first, Okonkwo seems an ideal representative of his community's

values. He earns honor and respect from Igbo people by developing the physical strength, manly courage, and disciplined will valued by his Igbo culture. As the novel progresses, however, Okonkwo's success gradually develops into a dangerous sense of individualism that flagrantly disregards the community's rules and decisions. For example, he beats his wife during the sacred Week of Peace, and he attempts to single-handedly attack the British instead of waiting for and accepting the community's collective decision. In fact, many critics have argued that this individualistic disregard for the community is Okonkwo's primary tragic flaw, though it is perhaps difficult to separate this individualism from Okonkwo's other character flaws such as inflexibility, hyper-masculinity, and an obsessive reaction against his father.

In an even broader context, Achebe adds yet another dimension to Okonkwo's tragedy by situating it within the historical context of British colonial expansion. As the novel progresses, the initial focus on Okonkwo's psychological struggles enlarges to include Okonkwo's political struggle against British colonialism. By situating the personal tragedy of Okonkwo's suicide within this larger historical tragedy of colonial domination, *Things Fall Apart* develops a double-tragedy. Moreover, this double-tragedy further complicates the interpretation of Okonkwo's character because the external tragedy of colonial domination largely provokes Okonkwo's internal aggression. Although both Okonkwo and Igbo society are responsible for their own destruction to some degree, there is also another sense in which they are destroyed by forces beyond their control. While the reader might condemn Okonkwo's rash outburst of violence, the reader also sympathizes with and perhaps even justifies the rage that Okonkwo feels while watching foreign invaders unjustly accuse and dominate his people. Even though Okonkwo's final act of resistance is ineffective and perhaps even misguided, it exemplifies how Africans and other colonized peoples have courageously resisted colonialism instead of passively accepting it. Consequently, Okonkwo's character is both tragically flawed and tragically heroic, and instead of separating the intermixed heroism and destructiveness that defines Okonkwo throughout the novel, Achebe's conclusion only emphasizes how Okonkwo's strengths and weaknesses are interrelated. Thus, Achebe's conclusion brings together a masterful sense of character, tragedy, and irony.

In addition, *Things Fall Apart* is also important stylistically because it develops a hybrid aesthetic form that creatively fuses European and African cultural forms. At the simplest level, Achebe does this through his use of language. By introducing numerous African terms throughout the novel, he develops a hybrid language that mixes Igbo and English words. While some of these words may be confusing at first, by the end of the novel the reader learns to recognize many basic Igbo words like *chi* (fate), *obi* (hut), and *om* (outcast). At a more complex level, however, Achebe also integrates African cultural traditions into the structure of the novel through his use of proverbs and folktales. Many of the insights developed in the novel are presented either through proverbs or through stories drawn from the rich oral traditions of Igbo culture. These stories, like the story about Mosquito's marriage proposal to Ear and the story about Tortoise's attempt to trick the birds out of their feast, function as stories-within-the-story, and they add additional layers of meaning to the main plot of the novel.

In addition to its literary and political value, *Things Fall Apart* is also a novel rich in anthropological detail. In many ways, it can be read as an anthropological description of the daily life and customs of the Igbo people because Achebe blends his description of Okonkwo's tragedy with a richly detailed description of Igbo culture before European colonization. Throughout the novel, Achebe describes numerous aspects of daily life in a traditional Igbo

community ranging from methods of farming and forms of entertainment to dietary practices, clan titles, kinship structures, and marriage customs. In addition, he also describes a wide variety of Igbo religious beliefs and ceremonies such as the Week of Peace, the Feast of the New Yam, the Ozo dance, *ogbanje* spirit-children who keep dying and being reborn, the Evil Forest, and various gods and goddesses. This comprehensive, detailed description of African customs not only helps the reader understand the daily activities and religious beliefs of the Igbo people, but it also helps the reader begin to understand an Igbo world view. Consequently, it represents not only how Igbo people live but also what they believe and how they think and feel.

Finally, Achebe adds yet another dimension to *Things Fall Apart* by concluding the novel with a strong critique of how western colonial histories have been written from biased, ethnocentric perspectives. While this historical dimension of the novel may not be readily apparent at first, Achebe makes it unmistakably clear in the concluding paragraph, which describes the District Commissioner's callous response to Okonkwo's suicide. In addition to being generally apathetic to Okonkwo's death, the District Commissioner seems even more inhuman because he takes interest in Okonkwo's suicide only because it will give him "new material" for his book. After the reader has read Achebe's detailed and moving description of Okonkwo's life, the District Commissioner dismisses this story as only worth a "reasonable paragraph" because there is "so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out the details." At this point, Achebe begins to turn the reader's attention from the District Commissioner's lack of compassion to his historical ignorance, which grossly underestimates the long and complex history leading up to Okonkwo's tragic death. Moreover, the District Commissioner's decision to title his book *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*, demonstrates both his inability to think of African people as anything other than primitive and his inability to recognize how he has brought violence instead of peace to the Lower Niger. By ending the novel with the District Commissioner's complete misinterpretation and miswriting of the scene of colonial conflict, Achebe suggests that his novel is not simply about the colonial encounter between two cultures. At a deeper level, it is also about how the story of that encounter is told. It is a story about the telling of history itself. By drawing attention to the District Commissioner's erroneous sense of history, Achebe reminds the reader that western descriptions of Africa have largely been written by men like the District Commissioner. Consequently, *Things Fall Apart* seeks to correct such erroneous historical records by retelling African history from an African perspective that intimately understands Okonkwo's pain and outrage, even if it does not completely condone Okonkwo's violent actions.

Source: Robert Bennett, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1997