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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Things Fall Apart

by Chinua Achebe

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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Notes

This novel vividly presents a picture of life in the Ibo society in Nigeria at the end of the nineteenth century. Chinua Achebe, one of the best known African writers of modern times, traces the life of one Ibo man, Okonkwo. The Ibo people pass down their history from generation to generation through proverbs, fables, legends, and myths. Expertly, Achebe weaves these stories into the telling of Okonkwo's tragic story.

Achebe illustrates how the arrival of white missionaries to the villages of the Ibo people disrupts the ancient traditions and inflicts humiliations on the Ibo people. It is this clash of cultures and values, between the Christian colonizers and the traditional culture of the Ibo people with the subsequent deterioration of the traditional culture, that is at the heart of this novel. Curiously, Achebe's anti-colonialist novel, published in 1959, was written in English, the language of the imperialist. You may want to consider why Achebe chose to do this.

All references come from the Anchor edition of *Things Fall Apart*, published 1994.

The instances in this book of violence, male domination, and sexuality are all depicted briefly and in ways that integrate these topics into the narrative appropriately.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. point out examples of proverbs in the story and comment on how the Ibo people use these sayings to illustrate general truths about life.
2. recognize the fables in the novel and be able to state the moral lessons they convey.
3. discuss the drum as a symbol for the heart, strength, and power of the Ibo people.
4. define irony and cite incidents in the text of it in the following areas:
 - the white man's view and treatment of the Ibo people as primitive.
 - the nature of the protagonist's crimes.
5. define tragic flaw and discuss the extent to which Okonkwo could be viewed as a tragic hero.
6. comment on the significance of the title of this novel as it relates to the major theme in the novel.
7. discuss the religion of the Ibo people and identify the following:
 - agbala
 - egwugwu
 - chi
 - Chukwu
8. define legend and identify examples of legends in the story.
9. find examples of myths in the story and point out how they help the Ibo explain natural phenomena.
10. discuss oral tradition and its importance in a society without a written language.
11. summarize the complex social rules in the Ibo culture regarding marriage.
12. comment on the impact of the missionaries on
 - outcasts
 - women
 - the passing of traditions from father to son
 - the economy
 - the justice system

Questions for Discussion and Essay

1. Define oral tradition. What is the difference between a fable, a myth, and a legend?
2. Comment on the general truth being taught by the following proverb. How does Okonkwo illustrate the value of this proverb in his life?

“As our people say, a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness.”
3. How does Obierika feel about “female crimes” and twins?
4. Compare Okonkwo’s life to his father’s. Which one do you think lives a happier life in the following areas: wealth, respect of his neighbors, happiness, and position with his ancestors?
5. In what sense does the Ibo culture show its approval or disapproval of spousal abuse?
6. Why do the people of the Abame village kill the white man on the bicycle?
7. What is the significance of the beating drums in the first two sections? Why do you think there is no mention of drums in the third part of the book?
8. In what ways do Ibo women have the right to decide who they are going to marry?
9. Define tragic flaw. What is Okonkwo’s tragic flaw? Does the Ibo society also have a tragic flaw?
10. List three examples of Okonkwo’s cruel personality and relate how he justifies his behavior in each case.
11. Who are the egwugwu and what function do they fill in Ibo society?
12. Support or refute this statement: The system of justice provided by the white man is much worse than the system of justice already available to the Ibo people.
13. Define each of the following religious terms: oracle, agbala, Chukwu, and chi.
14. How does Ikemefuna’s death impact Nwoye’s relationship with his father? Had Ikemefuna lived, do you think Nwoye would have joined the white church?
15. Why does Okonkwo wish his daughter, Ezinma, had been born a boy?
16. What is the importance of the kola nut, chalk, and palm wine in Ibo society?

Things Fall Apart

PART ONE

Chapter One

VOCABULARY

harmattan – a hot, dry wind
impending – upcoming
improvident – rash, careless
kite – bird of prey
plaintive – sad
proWess – strength

1. List four physical characteristics that separate Okonkwo’s appearance from that of the other men in his village.

2. How did Okonkwo bring honor to his village as a young man? What other achievements make him an important man?

Chapter Six

VOCABULARY

disembodied – without a body
fronds – leaves of plants like ferns and palm trees
grandees – rulers
prophesied – predicted the future
taut – tight

1. How do the drums reflect the emotions of the crowds at the wrestling match?

2. Why do you think Ezinma’s mother says to the priestess “Perhaps she has come to stay”?

3. Prove the following statement with incidents from the story: Physical strength is greatly admired by the Ibo people.

4. A tragic flaw is a defect of character which brings about the downfall of the protagonist. What do you think is Okonkwo's tragic flaw?

5. What is ironic about the fact that Okonkwo's crime is considered a "female" crime?

6. With what customs of the clan does Obierika not agree?

7. How does the following proverb explain the harsh punishment given to Okonkwo?

“As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others.”
