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Teaching Chinua Achebe's

Things Fall Apart

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Douglas Grudzina



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General Introduction to the Work

Chinua Achebe—The Author and His Work

THINGS FALL APART WAS PUBLISHED in 1959, the first novel by a young Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe. He has since published numerous novels, poems, and other works and has become an acclaimed voice in African literature. This novel, which he was hesitant to publish at the outset, is now considered the seminal novel about Africa by an African—the first modern African novel. It has been translated into dozens of languages from its original English.

Achebe was born in 1930 in Ogidi in eastern Nigeria, in what was then a British colony. The son of Christian parents of the Ibo ethnic group, he was educated at schools developed and run by the British. He learned English as a child and read classic English writers such as Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson. Early on, he absorbed the stereotypical European view of Africans in literature as primitive and uncultured, but he eventually came to realize that what he was reading did not reflect African culture as he knew it to be. After graduating from University in 1954, Achebe worked for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corp. and began his writing career.

In an essay on Achebe, the late John Povey of UCLA, founder of The John Povey Centre for the Study of English in Southern Africa, quotes Achebe: “First I had to tell Europe that the arrogance on which she sought to excuse her pillage of Africa, i.e., that Africa was the Primordial Void, was sheer humbug; that Africa had a history, a religion, a civilization. ... Actually it was not to Europe alone that I spoke. I spoke also to that part of ourselves that had come to accept Europe’s opinion of us,” (<http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4085/Achebe-Chinua>). His fiction was deeply entwined with his political views as Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960 and moved toward civil war. The Ibo attempted to form their own nation of Biafra in 1967 and Achebe served as Biafra’s ambassador. After a bloody war, the effort collapsed in 1970. Achebe continued writing and teaching.

Achebe came to the U.S. in 1972 to teach English at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He returned to the University of Nigeria in 1976 and continued to write and publish novels. A car accident in 1990 left him confined to a wheelchair with spinal damage and precipitated a return to the U.S., where he teaches at Bard College in New York. He won the prestigious Man Booker International Prize for literature in 2007.

New Historicism Applied to *Things Fall Apart*



Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.



1794: The Africa Association commissions the explorer Mungo Park to search for the headwaters of the Niger River and follow the river downstream to its mouth. While he will ultimately fail in his quest, Park will reach the upper Niger.

1805: Mungo Park sets out on a second expedition, this one sponsored by the British government. Again, his goal is to follow the Niger River to the sea. He fails once again, but he does cover more than 1,500 kilometers (932 miles).

1807: British Parliament passes “An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade,” but the illegal trade persists. To ward off economic catastrophe to the region, Britain works to increase “legitimate trade” with the Oyo Empire (modern-day Nigeria).

- With its economy and political structure destabilized, the Oyo Empire enters a period of internal struggle and unrest. Yorubas continue to capture and export slaves, only now many of the captives come from among the Yorubas themselves. To enforce the British ban on the slave trade, the Royal Navy imposes a blockade.
- Citing a desire to stabilize the native economy and enforce the ban on the slave trade, Britain becomes increasingly involved—politically, economically, and militarily—in internal Yoruban affairs.

By 1835: Europeans have mapped most of northwestern Africa.

- David Livingstone and Serpa Pinto have mapped the vast interior of southern and central Africa.
- Richard Burton, John Speke and James Granthave have located the great central lakes and the source of the Nile.

1840: British trade in palm oil and palm kernels is worth £1 million a year.

- Most of these resources (used in England for the manufacture of soap and the lubrication of machinery in the pre-petroleum era) come from Igboland in the south. The Igbo peoples use palm oil in cooking; the kernels are a source of food; trees are tapped for palm wine, and the fronds are used for building material. Most Igbo families find it easy and lucrative to transport the oil to rivers and streams and down the Niger River for sale at European trading centers near the coast.
- While slaves are no longer transported to the coast for export, they are either sold locally or kept on local farms to grow the Igbo’s primary food crop, yams.

Feminist Theory Applied to *Things Fall Apart*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

Feminism is an evolving philosophy, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One

Examining the Portrayal of Women in the Novel

1. As a class, identify the most notable female characters in the book (e.g., Ekwefi, Ezinma, etc.)
2. Still in full-class discussion, list the various social and cultural roles filled by women in the novel (e.g., nurture the young, serve as priestess/oracle, etc.).
3. Divide the class into an even number of groups.
4. Assign half of the groups (or allow them to choose) to examine the book for evidence of a positive attitude toward women. The other half will examine the book for evidence of a negative attitude toward women.
5. Reconvene the class and allow each group to report its findings.
6. As a class, discuss whether *Things Fall Apart* presents generally a positive or misogynistic portrayal of women.
 - Does the novel's portrayal of women reflect more the society about which Achebe has written or Achebe's own attitudes and values? Why?

NOTE: Students do not need to agree or come to consensus. The point is for them simply to examine the issue.

Mythological/Archetypal Criticism Applied to *Things Fall Apart*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is “a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested.” He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

3. Archetypal Situations

- the QUEST: the hero's endeavor to establish his or her identity or fulfill his or her destiny.

Variations on the QUEST can include:

- the Faustian bargain: the selling of one's soul to the devil (metaphorically representing the notion that one would "give anything" in order to...) in exchange for unlimited power, knowledge, wealth, etc. Examples include King Midas.
- the pursuit of revenge for a real or perceived wrong, as exemplified by Captain Ahab's quest in *Moby Dick*.
- the descent into the underworld. (Note that this is usually one part of the quest rather than the entire quest itself.)
- the RENEWAL OF LIFE: death and rebirth, resurrection as seen in the cycle of the seasons, the phases of the day, sleeping and waking. Examples are "Sleeping Beauty," "The Secret Garden," etc.
- INITIATION: coming of age, rites of passage. Some examples include the first hunt, weddings, teenage angst films.
- THE FALL: any event that marks a loss of innocence, a devolution from a paradisaical life or view-point to a tainted one.
- REDEMPTIVE SACRIFICE: any voluntary loss, especially a loss of life, that results in another's gaining or regaining a desired state.
- the CATALOG OF DIFFICULT TASKS: (labors of Hercules, Cinderella's treatment by her step-mother and stepsisters, etc.).
- the END OF THE WORLD: usually apocalyptic, involving warfare, a huge battle, a metaphoric final battle between good and evil.