

# Chinua Achebe- background information

- Born Albert Chinualumogu Achebe in 1930
- Grew up in Ogidi, Nigeria, one of the 1<sup>st</sup> centers of missionary work
- Lived as both a Christian and a member of the Ibo tribe
- Taught at several American Universities and in his native country

## Background (continued)

- Has written extensively, including articles, novels, short stories, essays, and children's books
- Is recognized for his ability to write simply yet eloquently about life's universal qualities
- Writes primarily about his native land, Africa

# *Things Fall Apart*

A Novel

By Chinua Achebe

(1958)

# Historical Context- Tribal Society

- Story takes place in the tribal village of Umoufia in the late 1880's, prior to English colonization
- The Ibo worship many gods who are represented by priests and priestesses within the tribe
- Each individual has a personal god, or chi, that directs his actions
- The Ibo are a hunting and gathering society with yams as the primary crop

## Tribal Society (continued)

- People in the village are grouped according to family, and the eldest male member holds the most power
- Large emphasis on tribal traditions and rituals
- Village concerns, including legislation, were handled by tribal councils
- System encouraged hard work and the spread of wealth
- In the novel, Umuofia is respected and feared by other villages

# Historical Context- the spread of Christianity

- Christianity took its strongest hold in Africa when the majority of the missionaries arrived in the late 1800's
- Missionaries provided education and attempted to convert tribes from their "heathenistic" beliefs
- Africans were distrustful of European Christians at first, but many eventually converted
- As more members adopted European values, the clans divided and conflicts arose

# Historical Context- English Colonization

- After the arrival of the British, conflicts between villages were resolved by white governmental rules
- When violence involved missionaries or bureaucrats, British soldiers would often slaughter entire villages instead of punishing guilty individuals
- Africa changed from a society determined by common language and cultures to a land divided by political borders that divided it into at least 50 nation states

## Colonization (continued)

- The divisions split ethnic groups which led to tension and sometimes violence
- British colonial rule in Nigeria lasted from 1903 to 1960
- On October 1, 1960, Nigeria was granted status as a sovereign state and member of the British Commonwealth, but was still under the rule of the British monarchy
- In 1963 a new constitution replaced the British monarch with a Nigerian president



## Compare & Contrast

- 1800's- before colonization, language & geography separate African societies
- Colonial Africa- Africa is divided into more the 50 nation-states with no regard to common languages or traditions

# Compare & Contrast

- 1800's- religion varies, but most Africans share some common beliefs and practices
- Colonial Africa- Missionaries arrive and introduce Christianity; many tribesmen convert

# Compare & Contrast

- 1800's- Africans have their own identities and cultures; there is little interest in participating in the modern world
- Colonial Africa- African children are taught European history so they can compete in the modern world; their own heritage is ignored
- Today-There is a renewed interest in cultural heritage, and traditional customs are being taught to African children

# Structure

- Part One = Umuofia (fatherland)
- Part Two = Mbanta (motherland)
- Part Three = No land (“things fall apart”)

# Setting

- Umuofia (gradual change; maintaining balance between male/female)
- “The Evil Forest”
- Mbanta (“Mother is Supreme”; Okonkwo’s 7-year exile=accelerated change in Umuofia)
- Return to homeland=no culture
- Not “African,” Not “Nigerian”—Ibo (Tribe is what matters)

# Introduction

- *Things Fall Apart* is regarded as a milestone in [African literature](#). It has come to be seen as the archetypal modern African novel in English,<sup>[3][6]</sup> and is read in Nigeria and throughout Africa. It is studied widely in Europe, India, and North America, where it has spawned numerous secondary and tertiary analytical works
- Achebe's writing about African society, in telling from an African point of view the story of the colonization of the Igbo, tends to extinguish the conception that African culture had been savage and primitive.
- In *Things Fall Apart*, western culture is portrayed as being "arrogant and ethnocentric," insisting that the African culture needed a leader. As it had no kings or chiefs, Umuofian culture was vulnerable to invasion by western civilization. It is felt that the repression of the Igbo language at the end of the novel contributes greatly to the destruction of the culture

# Traditions/Cultural Institutions

- Economic system (cowries)
- Marriage (bride price)
- Funerals
- Justice System (“supreme court”=masked leaders of tribe)
- Government/leaders=titles and oracle of caves and hills

- **Igbo**, also called **Ibo**, people living chiefly in southeastern [Nigeria](#) who speak [Igbo](#), a language of the [Benue-Congo branch](#) of the [Niger-Congo language family](#).
- Achebe concerns traditional Igbo life at the time of the advent of missionaries and colonial government in his homeland. His principal character cannot accept the new order, even though the old has already collapsed.



# Major Characters

- Okonkwo- “the roaring flame”- Strong, proud and driven; despises anything he regards as weakness; his strengths become his weakness and lead to his ultimate downfall
- Unoka- Okonkwo’s father and the root of all his fears and problems; represents all the characteristics the Ibo abhor (gentleness, lack of ambition, sensitivity to people & nature)

## Major Characters (continued)

- Okonkwo's first wife is never mentioned by name; she is wise, compassionate, peaceful, and adheres to tribal traditions
- Ekwefe- Okonkwo's second wife; courageous and strong willed
- Ojiugo- Okonkwo's third and youngest wife; makes her husband angry and prompts him to break the sacred Week of Peace

## Major Characters (continued)

- Nwoye- Okonkwo's son; disappoints him by showing signs of his grandfather's sensitivity and laziness
- Ikemefuna-comes to live with Okonkwo's family as a peace offering from another tribe; fills the void in Okonkwo's life that his own son cannot
- Obierika- Okonkwo's best friend, more of a thinking man

# Character List(s)

- **Okonkwo** - An influential clan leader in Umuofia. Since early childhood, Okonkwo's embarrassment about his lazy, squandering, and effeminate father, Unoka, has driven him to succeed. Okonkwo's hard work and prowess in war have earned him a position of high status in his clan, and he attains wealth sufficient to support three wives and their children. Okonkwo's tragic flaw is that he is terrified of looking weak like his father. As a result, he behaves rashly, bringing a great deal of trouble and sorrow upon himself and his family.

## Character List(s)

- **Nwoye** - Okonkwo's oldest son, who Okonkwo believes is weak and lazy. Okonkwo continually beats Nwoye, hoping to correct the faults that he perceives in him. Influenced by Ikemefuna, Nwoye begins to exhibit more masculine behavior, which pleases Okonkwo. He maintains, however, doubts about some of the laws and rules of his tribe and eventually converts to Christianity, an act that Okonkwo criticizes as “effeminate.” Okonkwo believes that Nwoye is afflicted with the same weaknesses that his father, Unoka, possessed in abundance.

- **Ezinma** - The only child of Okonkwo's second wife, Ekwefi. As the only one of Ekwefi's ten children to survive past infancy, Ezinma is the center of her mother's world. Their relationship is atypical—Ezinma calls Ekwefi by her name and is treated by her as an equal. Ezinma is also Okonkwo's favorite child, for she understands him better than any of his other children and reminds him of Ekwefi when Ekwefi was the village beauty. Okonkwo rarely demonstrates his affection, however, because he fears that doing so would make him look weak. Furthermore, he wishes that Ezinma were a boy because she would have been the perfect son.

- **Ikemefuna** - A boy given to Okonkwo by a neighboring village. Ikemefuna lives in the hut of Okonkwo's first wife and quickly becomes popular with Okonkwo's children. He develops an especially close relationship with Nwoye, Okonkwo's oldest son, who looks up to him. Okonkwo too becomes very fond of Ikemefuna, who calls him “father” and is a perfect clansman, but Okonkwo does not demonstrate his affection because he fears that doing so would make him look weak.

- **Unoka** - Okonkwo's father, of whom Okonkwo has been ashamed since childhood. By the standards of the clan, Unoka was a coward and a spendthrift. He never took a title in his life, he borrowed money from his clansmen, and he rarely repaid his debts. He never became a warrior because he feared the sight of blood. Moreover, he died of an abominable illness. On the positive side, Unoka appears to have been a talented musician and gentle, if idle. He may well have been a dreamer, ill suited to the chauvinistic culture into which he was born. The novel opens ten years after his death.
- **Obierika** - Okonkwo's close friend, whose daughter's wedding provides cause for festivity early in the novel. Obierika looks out for his friend, selling Okonkwo's yams to ensure that Okonkwo won't suffer financial ruin while in exile and comforting Okonkwo when he is depressed. Like Nwoye, Obierika questions some of the tribe's traditional strictures.



- **Ekwefi** - Okonkwo's second wife, once the village beauty. Ekwefi ran away from her first husband to live with Okonkwo. Ezinma is her only surviving child, her other nine having died in infancy, and Ekwefi constantly fears that she will lose Ezinma as well. Ekwefi is good friends with Chielo, the priestess of the goddess Agbala.
- **Enoch** - A fanatical convert to the Christian church in Umuofia. Enoch's disrespectful act of ripping the mask off an egwugwu during an annual ceremony to honor the earth deity leads to the climactic clash between the indigenous and colonial justice systems. While Mr. Brown, early on, keeps Enoch in check in the interest of community harmony, Reverend Smith approves of his zealotry.

- **Uchendu** - The younger brother of Okonkwo's mother. Uchendu receives Okonkwo and his family warmly when they travel to Mbanta and he advises Okonkwo to be grateful for the comfort that his motherland offers him lest he anger the dead—especially his mother, who is buried there. Uchendu himself has suffered—all but one of his six wives are dead and he has buried twenty-two children. He is a peaceful, compromising man and functions as a foil (a character whose emotions or actions highlight, by means of contrast, the emotions or actions of another character) to Okonkwo, who acts impetuously and without thinking.

- **Mr. Brown** - The first white missionary to travel to Umuofia. Mr. Brown institutes a policy of compromise, understanding, and non-aggression between his flock and the clan. He even becomes friends with prominent clansmen and builds a school and a hospital in Umuofia. Unlike Reverend Smith, he attempts to appeal respectfully to the tribe's value system rather than harshly impose his religion on it.
- **The District Commissioner** - An authority figure in the white colonial government in Nigeria. The prototypical racist colonialist, the District Commissioner thinks that he understands everything about native African customs and cultures and he has no respect for them. He plans to work his experiences into an ethnographic study on local African tribes, the idea of which embodies his dehumanizing and reductive attitude toward race relations.

- **Reverend James Smith** - The missionary who replaces Mr. Brown. Unlike Mr. Brown, Reverend Smith is uncompromising and strict. He demands that his converts reject all of their indigenous beliefs, and he shows no respect for indigenous customs or culture. He is the stereotypical white colonialist, and his behavior epitomizes the problems of colonialism. He intentionally provokes his congregation, inciting it to anger and even indirectly, through Enoch, encouraging some fairly
- **Mr. Kiaga** - The native-turned-Christian missionary who arrives in Mbanta and converts Nwoye and many others.

- **Ogbuefi Ezeudu** - The oldest man in the village and one of the most important clan elders and leaders. Ogbuefi Ezeudu was a great warrior in his youth and now delivers messages from the Oracle.
- **Chielo** - A priestess in Umuofia who is dedicated to the Oracle of the goddess Agbala. Chielo is a widow with two children. She is good friends with Ekwefi and is fond of Ezinma, whom she calls “my daughter.” At one point, she carries Ezinma on her back for miles in order to help purify her and appease the gods.

- **Akunna** - A clan leader of Umuofia. Akunna and Mr. Brown discuss their religious beliefs peacefully, and Akunna's influence on the missionary advances Mr. Brown's strategy for converting the largest number of clansmen by working with, rather than against, their belief system. In so doing, however, Akunna formulates an articulate and rational defense of his religious system and draws some striking parallels between his style of worship and that of the Christian missionaries.

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- **Nwakibie** - A wealthy clansmen who takes a chance on Okonkwo by lending him 800 seed yams—twice the number for which Okonkwo asks. Nwakibie thereby helps Okonkwo build up the beginnings of his personal wealth, status, and independence.
- **Okagbue Uyanwa** - A famous medicine man whom Okonkwo summons for help in dealing with Ezinma's health problems.
- **Maduka** - Obierika's son. Maduka wins a wrestling contest in his mid-teens. Okonkwo wishes he had promising, manly sons like Maduka.
- **Obiageli** - The daughter of Okonkwo's first wife. Although Obiageli is close to Ezinma in age, Ezinma has a great deal of influence over her.
- **Ojiugo** - Okonkwo's third and youngest wife, and the mother of Nkechi. Okonkwo beats Ojiugo during the Week of Peace.



# Summary

- Okonkwo is a wealthy and respected warrior of the Umuofia clan, a lower Nigerian tribe that is part of a consortium of nine connected villages. He is haunted by the actions of Unoka, his cowardly and spendthrift father, who died in disrepute, leaving many village debts unsettled. In response, Okonkwo becomes a clansman, warrior, farmer, and family provider extraordinaire. He has a twelve-year-old son named Nwoye whom he finds lazy; Okonkwo worries that Nwoye will end up a failure like Unoka.
- In a settlement with a neighboring tribe, Umuofia wins a virgin and a fifteen-year-old boy. Okonkwo takes charge of the boy, Ikemefuna, and finds an ideal son in him. Nwoye likewise forms a strong attachment to the newcomer. Despite his fondness for Ikemefuna and despite the fact that the boy begins to call him “father,” Okonkwo does not let himself show any affection for him.
- During the Week of Peace, Okonkwo accuses his youngest wife, Ojiugo, of negligence. He severely beats her, breaking the peace of the sacred week. He makes some sacrifices to show his repentance, but he has shocked his community irreparably.

- Ikemefuna stays with Okonkwo's family for three years. Nwoye looks up to him as an older brother and, much to Okonkwo's pleasure, develops a more masculine attitude. One day, the locusts come to Umuofia—they will come every year for seven years before disappearing for another generation. The village excitedly collects them because they are good to eat when cooked.
- Ogbuefi Ezeudu, a respected village elder, informs Okonkwo in private that the Oracle has said that Ikemefuna must be killed. He tells Okonkwo that because Ikemefuna calls him “father,” Okonkwo should not take part in the boy's death. Okonkwo lies to Ikemefuna, telling him that they must return him to his home village. Nwoye bursts into tears.
- As he walks with the men of Umuofia, Ikemefuna thinks about seeing his mother. After several hours of walking, some of Okonkwo's clansmen attack the boy with machetes. Ikemefuna runs to Okonkwo for help. But Okonkwo, who doesn't wish to look weak in front of his fellow tribesmen, cuts the boy down despite the Oracle's admonishment. When Okonkwo returns home, Nwoye deduces that his friend is

- Okonkwo sinks into a depression, able neither to sleep nor eat. He visits his friend Obierika and begins to feel revived a bit. Okonkwo's daughter Ezinma falls ill, but she recovers after Okonkwo gathers leaves for her medicine.
- The death of Ogbuefi Ezeudu is announced to the surrounding villages by means of the ekwe, a musical instrument. Okonkwo feels guilty because the last time Ezeudu visited him was to warn him against taking part in Ikemefuna's death. At Ogbuefi Ezeudu's large and elaborate funeral, the men beat drums and fire their guns. Tragedy compounds upon itself when Okonkwo's gun explodes and kills Ogbuefi Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son.
- Because killing a clansman is a crime against the earth goddess, Okonkwo must take his family into exile for seven years in order to atone. He gathers his most valuable belongings and takes his family to his mother's natal village, Mbanta. The men from Ogbuefi Ezeudu's quarter burn Okonkwo's buildings and kill his animals to cleanse the village of his sin.

- Okonkwo's kinsmen, especially his uncle, Uchendu, receive him warmly. They help him build a new compound of huts and lend him yam seeds to start a farm. Although he is bitterly disappointed at his misfortune, Okonkwo reconciles himself to life in his motherland.
- During the second year of Okonkwo's exile, Obierika brings several bags of cowries (shells used as currency) that he has made by selling Okonkwo's yams. Obierika plans to continue to do so until Okonkwo returns to the village. Obierika also brings the bad news that Abame, another village, has been destroyed by the white man.
- Soon afterward, six missionaries travel to Mbanta. Through an interpreter named Mr. Kiaga, the missionaries' leader, Mr. Brown, speaks to the villagers. He tells them that their gods are false and that worshipping more than one God is idolatrous. But the villagers do not understand how the Holy Trinity can be accepted as one God. Although his aim is to convert the residents of Umuofia to Christianity, Mr. Brown does not allow his followers to antagonize the clan.

- Mr. Brown grows ill and is soon replaced by Reverend James Smith, an intolerant and strict man. The more zealous converts are relieved to be free of Mr. Brown's policy of restraint. One such convert, Enoch, dares to unmask an egwugwu during the annual ceremony to honor the earth deity, an act equivalent to killing an ancestral spirit. The next day, the egwugwu burn Enoch's compound and Reverend Smith's church to the ground.
- The District Commissioner is upset by the burning of the church and requests that the leaders of Umuofia meet with him. Once they are gathered, however, the leaders are handcuffed and thrown in jail, where they suffer insults and physical abuse.

- After the prisoners are released, the clansmen hold a meeting, during which five court messengers approach and order the clansmen to desist. Expecting his fellow clan members to join him in uprising, Okonkwo kills their leader with his machete. When the crowd allows the other messengers to escape, Okonkwo realizes that his clan is not willing to go to war.
- When the District Commissioner arrives at Okonkwo's compound, he finds that Okonkwo has hanged himself. Obierika and his friends lead the commissioner to the body. Obierika explains that suicide is a grave sin; thus, according to custom, none of Okonkwo's clansmen may touch his body. The commissioner, who is writing a book about Africa, believes that the story of Okonkwo's rebellion and death will make for an interesting paragraph or two. He has already chosen the book's title: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

# Character Analysis

- **Okonkwo**

- Okonkwo, the son of the effeminate and lazy Unoka, strives to make his way in a world that seems to value manliness. In so doing, he rejects everything for which he believes his father stood. Unoka was idle, poor, profligate, cowardly, gentle, and interested in music and conversation. Okonkwo consciously adopts opposite ideals and becomes productive, wealthy, thrifty, brave, violent, and adamantly opposed to music and anything else that he perceives to be “soft,” such as conversation and emotion. He is stoic to a fault. Okonkwo achieves great social and financial success by embracing these ideals. He marries three wives and fathers several children.

- Nevertheless, just as his father was at odds with the values of the community around him, so too does Okonkwo find himself unable to adapt to changing times as the white man comes to live among the Umuofians. As it becomes evident that compliance rather than violence constitutes the wisest principle for survival, Okonkwo realizes that he has become a relic, no longer able to function within his changing society.
- Okonkwo is a tragic hero in the classical sense: although he is a superior character, his tragic flaw—the equation of manliness with rashness, anger, and violence—brings about his own destruction. Okonkwo is gruff, at times, and usually unable to express his feelings (the narrator frequently uses the word “inwardly” in reference to Okonkwo's emotions). But his emotions are indeed quite complex, as his “manly” values conflict with his “unmanly” ones, such as fondness for Ikemefuna and Ezinma. The narrator privileges us with information that Okonkwo's fellow clan members do not have—that Okonkwo surreptitiously follows Ekwefi into the forest in pursuit of Ezinma, for example—and thus allows us to see the tender, worried father beneath the seemingly indifferent exterior.



- **Nwoye**

- Nwoye, Okonkwo's oldest son, struggles in the shadow of his powerful, successful, and demanding father. His interests are different from Okonkwo's and resemble more closely those of Unoka, his grandfather. He undergoes many beatings, at a loss for how to please his father, until the arrival of Ikemefuna, who becomes like an older brother and teaches him a gentler form of successful masculinity. As a result, Okonkwo backs off, and Nwoye even starts to win his grudging approval. Nwoye remains conflicted, however: though he makes a show of scorning feminine things in order to please his father, he misses his mother's stories.
- With the unconscionable murder of Ikemefuna, however, Nwoye retreats into himself and finds himself forever changed. His reluctance to accept Okonkwo's masculine values turns into pure embitterment toward him and his ways. When missionaries come to Mbanta, Nwoye's hope and faith are reawakened, and he eventually joins forces with them. Although Okonkwo curses his lot for having borne so “effeminate” a son and disowns Nwoye, Nwoye appears to have found peace at last in leaving the oppressive atmosphere of his father's tyranny.

- **Ezinma**

- Ezinma, Okonkwo's favorite daughter and the only child of Ekwefi, is bold in the way that she approaches—and even sometimes contradicts—her father. Okonkwo remarks to himself multiple times that he wishes she had been born a boy, since he considers her to have such a masculine spirit. Ezinma alone seems to win Okonkwo's full attention, affection, and, ironically, respect. She and he are kindred spirits, which boosts her confidence and precociousness. She grows into a beautiful young woman who sensibly agrees to put off marriage until her family returns from exile so as to help her father leverage his sociopolitical power most effectively. In doing so, she shows an approach similar to that of Okonkwo: she puts strategy ahead of emotion.

- **Mr. Brown**

- Mr. Brown represents Achebe's attempt to craft a well-rounded portrait of the colonial presence by tempering bad personalities with good ones. Mr. Brown's successor, Reverend Smith, is zealous, vengeful, small-minded, and manipulative; he thus stands in contrast to Mr. Brown, who, on the other hand, is benevolent if not always beneficent. Mr. Brown succeeds in winning a large number of converts because he listens to the villagers' stories, beliefs, and opinions. He also accepts the converts unconditionally. His conversation with Akunna represents this sympathetic stance. The derisive comments that Reverend Smith makes about Mr. Brown after the latter's departure illustrate the colonial intolerance for any kind of sympathy for, and genuine interest in, the native culture. The surname Brown hints at his ability to navigate successfully the clear-cut racial division between the colonizers and the

# Themes, Motifs, and Symbols (s)

- **Themes**

- **The Struggle between Change and Tradition**

- As a story about a culture on the verge of change, *Things Fall Apart* deals with how the prospect and reality of change affect various characters. The tension about whether change should be privileged over tradition often involves questions of personal status. Okonkwo, for example, resists the new political and religious orders because he feels that they are not manly and that he himself will not be manly if he consents to join or even tolerate them. To some extent, Okonkwo's resistance of cultural change is also due to his fear of losing societal status. His sense of self-worth is dependent upon the traditional standards by which society judges him. This system of evaluating the self inspires many of the clan's outcasts to embrace Christianity. Long scorned, these outcasts find in the Christian value system a refuge from the Igbo cultural values that place them below everyone else. In their new community, these converts enjoy a more elevated status. The villagers in general are caught between resisting and embracing change and they face the dilemma of trying to determine how best to adapt to the reality of change. Many of the villagers are excited about the new opportunities and techniques that the missionaries bring. This European influence, however, threatens to extinguish the need for the mastery of traditional methods of farming, harvesting, building, and cooking. These traditional methods, once crucial for survival, are now, to varying degrees, dispensable. Throughout the novel, Achebe shows how dependent such traditions are upon storytelling and language and thus how quickly the abandonment of the Igbo language for English could lead to the eradication of these traditions.

- **Varying Interpretations of Masculinity**

- Okonkwo's relationship with his late father shapes much of his violent and ambitious demeanor. He wants to rise above his father's legacy of spendthrift, indolent behavior, which he views as weak and therefore feminine. This association is inherent in the clan's language—the narrator mentions that the word for a man who has not taken any of the expensive, prestige-indicating titles is *agbala*, which also means “woman.” But, for the most part, Okonkwo's idea of manliness is not the clan's. He associates masculinity with aggression and feels that anger is the only emotion that he should display. For this reason, he frequently beats his wives, even threatening to kill them from time to time. We are told that he does not think about things, and we see him acting rashly and impetuously. Yet others who are in no way effeminate do not behave in this way. Obierika, unlike Okonkwo, “was a man who thought about things.” Whereas Obierika refuses to accompany the men on the trip to kill Ikemefuna, Okonkwo not only volunteers to join the party that will execute his surrogate son but also violently stabs him with his machete simply because he is afraid of appearing weak.
- Okonkwo's seven-year exile from his village only reinforces his notion that men are stronger than women. While in exile, he lives among the kinsmen of his motherland but resents the period in its entirety. The exile is his opportunity to get in touch with his feminine side and to acknowledge his maternal ancestors, but he keeps reminding himself that his maternal kinsmen are not as warlike and fierce as he remembers the villagers of Umuofia to be. He faults them for their preference of negotiation, compliance, and avoidance over anger and bloodshed. In Okonkwo's understanding, his uncle Uchendu exemplifies this pacifist (and therefore somewhat effeminate) mode.

- **Language as a Sign of Cultural Difference**

- Language is an important theme in *Things Fall Apart* on several levels. In demonstrating the imaginative, often formal language of the Igbo, Achebe emphasizes that Africa is not the silent or incomprehensible country that books such as *Heart of Darkness* made it out to be. Rather, by peppering the novel with Igbo words, Achebe shows that the Igbo language is too complex for direct translation into English. Similarly, Igbo culture cannot be understood within the framework of European colonialist values. Achebe also points out that Africa has many different languages: the villagers of Umuofia, for example, make fun of Mr. Brown's translator because his language is slightly different from their own.
- On a macroscopic level, it is extremely significant that Achebe chose to write *Things Fall Apart* in English—he clearly intended it to be read by the West at least as much, if not more, than by his fellow Nigerians. His goal was to critique and emend the portrait of Africa that was painted by so many writers of the colonial period. Doing so required the use of English, the language of those colonial writers. Through his inclusion of proverbs, folktales, and songs translated from the Igbo language, Achebe managed to capture and convey the rhythms, structures, cadences, and beauty of the Igbo language.

- **Motifs**

- **Chi**

- The concept of chi is discussed at various points throughout the novel and is important to our understanding of Okonkwo as a tragic hero. The chi is an individual's personal god, whose merit is determined by the individual's good fortune or lack thereof. Along the lines of this interpretation, one can explain Okonkwo's tragic fate as the result of a problematic chi—a thought that occurs to Okonkwo at several points in the novel. For the clan believes, as the narrator tells us in Chapter Fourteen, a “man could not rise beyond the destiny of his chi.” But there is another understanding of chi that conflicts with this definition. In Chapter Four, the narrator relates, according to an Igbo proverb, that “when a man says yes his chi says yes also.” According to this understanding, individuals will their own destinies. Thus, depending upon our interpretation of chi, Okonkwo seems either more or less responsible for his own tragic death. Okonkwo himself shifts between these poles: when things are going well for him, he perceives himself as master and maker of his own destiny; when things go badly, however, he automatically disavows responsibility and asks why he should be so ill fated.

- **Animal Imagery**

- In their descriptions, categorizations, and explanations of human behavior and wisdom, the Igbo often use animal anecdotes to naturalize their rituals and beliefs. The presence of animals in their folklore reflects the environment in which they live—not yet “modernized” by European influence. Though the colonizers, for the most part, view the Igbo's understanding of the world as rudimentary, the Igbo perceive these animal stories, such as the account of how the tortoise's shell came to be bumpy, as logical explanations of natural phenomena. Another important animal image is the figure of the sacred python. Enoch's alleged killing and eating of the python symbolizes the transition to a new form of spirituality and a new religious order. Enoch's disrespect of the python clashes with the Igbo's reverence for it, epitomizing the incompatibility of colonialist and indigenous values.

- **Symbols**

- **Locusts**

- Achebe depicts the locusts that descend upon the village in highly allegorical terms that prefigure the arrival of the white settlers, who will feast on and exploit the resources of the Igbo. The fact that the Igbo eat these locusts highlights how innocuous they take them to be. Similarly, those who convert to Christianity fail to realize the damage that the culture of the colonizer does to the culture of the colonized.
    - The language that Achebe uses to describe the locusts indicates their symbolic status. The repetition of words like “settled” and “every” emphasizes the suddenly ubiquitous presence of these insects and hints at the way in which the arrival of the white settlers takes the Igbo off guard. Furthermore, the locusts are so heavy they break the tree branches, which symbolizes the fracturing of Igbo traditions and culture under the onslaught of colonialism and white settlement. Perhaps the most explicit clue that the locusts symbolize the colonists is Obierika's comment in Chapter Fifteen: “the Oracle . . . said that other white men were on their way. They were locusts. . . .”

- **Fire**

- Okonkwo is associated with burning, fire, and flame throughout the novel, alluding to his intense and dangerous anger—the only emotion that he allows himself to display. Yet the problem with fire, as Okonkwo acknowledges in Chapters Seventeen and Twenty-Four, is that it destroys everything it consumes. Okonkwo is both physically destructive—he kills Ikemefuna and Ogbuefi Ezeudu's son—and emotionally destructive—he suppresses his fondness for Ikemefuna and Ezinma in favor of a colder, more masculine aura. Just as fire feeds on itself until all that is left is a pile of ash, Okonkwo eventually succumbs to his intense rage, allowing it to rule his actions until it destroys him.

# Traditions/Cultural Institutions

- Economic system (cowries)
- Marriage (bride price)
- Funerals
- Justice System (“supreme court”=masked leaders of tribe)
- Government/leaders=titles and oracle of caves and hills

# Themes

- Custom and Tradition
- Choices and Consequences
- Alienation and Loneliness
- Betrayal
- Change and Transformation
- Good and Evil
- Culture Clash



# Themes

- Male/female aspects of a culture
- Clash of cultures
- Fate
- Primitive vs. Civilized
- Change
- Traditions/Institutions that make a culture

# Symbolism and Foreshadow

- Yams
- Caves and Hills
- Guns (accidental killing=“feminine”)
- Hanging
- Locusts