

# THINGS FALL APART (1958) Study Guide: Reading & Study Questions

**Part I, Chs. 1-13 (pp. 3-88) | Part II, Chs. 14-19 (pp. 91-118) | Part III, Chs. 20-25 (pp. 121-148)**

URL of this page: <http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/achebTFA.htm>

Formerly: <http://www.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/achebtfa.htm>

References to page numbers below are from the edition used in **HUM 211 Cultures & Literatures of Africa**: Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. [First published 1958.] Expanded edition with notes. 1996. London: Heinemann, 2000.

## Part I, Chs. 1-13 (pp. 3-88)

1. Achebe takes the title for his novel from a line in a classic Western modernist poem "The Second Coming" (wr. 1919; pub. 1921), by William Butler Yeats (1865-1939; Irish). Paul Briens explains the background of Yeats' poem: "Yeats was attracted to the spiritual and occult world and fashioned for himself an elaborate mythology to explain human experience. 'The Second Coming,' written after the catastrophe of World War I and with communism and fascism rising, is a compelling glimpse of an inhuman world about to be born. Yeats believed that history in part moved in two thousand-year cycles. The Christian era, which followed that of the ancient world, was about to give way to an ominous period represented by the rough, pitiless beast in the poem." Read "The Second Coming" (below) and consider why Achebe might chose to take the title of his novel from Yeats' poem. Consider how Achebe's literary **allusion** to Yeats' poem might deepen or extend—by comparison and/or contrast—the meaning(s) of Achebe's title and his novel.

### THE SECOND COMING

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come at last,  
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

2. Describe Okonkwo, the protagonist of Things Fall Apart. Consider him as an Igbo heroic character: how does he work to achieve greatness as defined by his and culture? How does he differ from Western heroes whom you are community familiar with? What are strengths and weaknesses? Okonkwo's
3. Describe Unoka, Okonkwo's father. What are Okonkwo's feelings toward Unoka, and why? How does the (negative) example of his father shape Okonkwo's character and actions? What do the early descriptions of Okonkwo's success and Unoka's failure tell us about Igbo society? How does one succeed in this cultural context? What do we learn from the system of the taking of titles? Who seems to be excluded from opportunities to gain such success?
4. Describe the **narrator** of *Things Fall Apart*, the "voice" telling us the story of Okonkwo, Umuofia (Igbo for "people of

the forest," per Brians), and the Igbo world of the nine villages. How would you describe this narrative voice, its point of view, its values and perspectives? In the introductory essay to our edition, Simon Gikandi calls the novel's storyteller a "witness" (xiii)—to what does Achebe's narrator bear "witness"?

5. Consider the impact of Achebe's use of "**African English**." Describe who Achebe's intended audience(s) might be. What is the effect on you, as a Western reader and outsider to Igbo culture? Consider how Achebe's language choices contribute to the novel. For example: (a) Achebe's use of Igbo words like egwugwu and iyi-uwa, untranslated in the novel itself, but briefly explained by the glossary on pp. liii-iv. (note that many editions of *Things Fall Apart* have been published without such translations; (b) his selection of Igbo character names like **Unoka** ("Home is supreme"), **Nwoye** (from nwa = "child") and **Okonkwo** (from oko = attributes of masculinity + nkwo = the third day of the Igbo 4-day week, the day on which Okonkwo was born); and (c) his integration of proverbs and folktales, oral art forms characterizing key elements of Igbo thought and speech. For example, "proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten." What does this mean? Palm oil is rich yellow oil pressed from the fruit of certain palm trees. The glossary explains it is used in food preparation and cooking, and later became a major cash crop exported to Europe (p. iv). Note ch. 3's proverb about proverbs, and look for other proverbs as you read. Ch. 9 offers the story of the mosquito, one of several West African tales that explain why these insects buzz irritatingly in people's ears. Can you think of any similar folktales told in your culture? What is the moral of the fable of the tortoise told in Ch. 11? (We may do another tortoise fable in class.) What values do these stories reflect? Note that some stories are women's stories, and others are men's stories.
6. Describe the **setting** (time, place, culture) of the novel. Try to apply what you have learned from reading the essay "Igbo Culture and History" (pp. xix-xlix in our text). Attend to Achebe's presentation of the details of everyday village lifeways in Umuofia, the values and beliefs of the Igbo people, and the importance of ritual, ceremony, social hierarchy, and personal achievement in Igbo culture. How is social life organized?. What are the important celebrations? What is the role of war, of religion, and of the arts? What is the role of the individual in relation to the community of Umuofia? Compare /contrast Igbo lifeways, customs, perspectives, beliefs, and values to those of your own culture.
7. What do we learn from the kola ceremony of hospitality? Paul Brians explains, "Kola is a mild stimulant, comparable to tea or coffee, which is served on most social occasions in this culture. It is also one ingredient after which Coca-Cola is named. Note how the ritual for sharing kola is described without being explained [although in our edition, the Glossary, p. liv, explains that kola nuts are "offered to guests on special occasions]." Palm-wine is a naturally fermented product of the palm-wine tree, a sort of natural beer. How is awareness of rank observed in the drinking of the palm wine? Note how Achebe introduces—but does not fully explain—Igbo customs, rituals, and ceremonies in the novel. Think about why Achebe chooses to do this, considering that he wrote for an international non-African audience as well as his own peoples.
8. Note the means of exchange—cowry shells threaded on strings—common in many African cultures. "The villages' distance from the sea makes cowries sufficiently rare to serve as money," according to Paul Brians; "cowries from as far away as Southeast Asia have been found in sub-Saharan Africa."
9. What effect does night have on the people in Ch. 2? What do they fear? How do they deal with their fear of snakes at night?
10. What is the cause and nature of the conflict with Mbaino? Review "Homicide," pp. xxxvii-xxxviii, and keep this discussion in mind when you read Ch. 13, where a serious incident has tragic consequences for Okonkwo, though it would be treated as a accidental manslaughter under our law.
11. What are the important crops? What are the seasons? How does sharecropping work? What are the male and female designated crops, and why? What is the relationship of women to agriculture? Review the discussion of Igbo "Women's Associations" pp. xxviii-xxx. In contrast to other (e.g. Biblical) representations of locusts as a terrible plague, how does the village react to the coming of the locusts in Ch. 7?
12. Consider the dual roles in the human and spiritual worlds played by the egwugwu and Chielo, the priestess of Agbala. Review "Igbo Religion" (pp. xxxii-xxxix), including the discussion of "Igbo Oracles." Chielo, the priestess of Agbala is introduced in Ch. 3. What does her power and status in Umuofia suggest about women's roles in Igbo culture and religious beliefs? Later in the novel, note Chielo's roles in the village (e.g., in Ch. 6). What are those roles? What does the Ch. 11 incident involving the priestess of Agbala tell us about the values of the culture? What side of Okonkwo is revealed by his behavior during that long night?

13. The **chi** or personal spirit is a recurring theme in the novel, a spiritual belief important to understanding the main character Okonkwo. Review the discussion of the chi on p. xxxv. Interpret this proverb, spoken of Okonkwo: "When a man says yes his chi says yes also." Trace further references in the novel to the chi. What role does Okonkwo's chi play in shaping his destiny? Note, however, that "The Igbo people did not believe that a man's chi controlled his entire destiny" (Ohadike p. xxxv). Trace the other factors at work in Okonkwo's case
14. Compare **Obierika**—a man "who thinks about things"—to Okonkwo. Consider Obierika as a kind of **foil**—a parallel or contrasting character—to Okonkwo: Note the instances when Okonkwo fails to heed the advice of others, especially of Obierika: what are the consequences? Three times in Part I, Okonkwo breaks Igbo taboos: what drives him to do so in each case, and what are the consequences to Okonkwo, to his family, and to his community?
15. **Family Life:** Examine family life and living arrangements in Okonkwo's home. Describe Okonkwo's relationships to his wives and children, especially to Ekwefi, Ezinma, and Nwoye. What differing roles and functions do men and women have in Igbo society? Paul Briens points out "that it is women who are chiefly responsible for decorating the houses. In many African cultures they are also the chief domestic architects, and the mud walls are shaped by them into pleasing patterns." What is Okonkwo's attitude toward women? In this polygamous culture, men may take more than one wife and each household is enclosed in a compound. Review the section on "Igbo Marriage Customs," pp. xxx-xxxii. Each wife lives in a hut with her children, and the husband visits each wife in turn, though he has his own hut as well. Children are often cared for more or less communally—another African proverb states, "It takes a village to raise a child." Compare/contrast the advantages and disadvantages of this social structure to our own family arrangements in the U.S.
16. What is the crime that causes Okonkwo's to be reprimanded in Ch. 4? What does it tell you about the values of the culture? Why, according to Ezeani, is wife beating considered wrong even at times other than Peace Week?
17. Briefly summarize the story of Ekwefi given in Ch. 5. What kind of a woman is she? What do you think is the significance of women having to sit with their legs together? Ezinma is believed to be an **ogbanje**, meaning those who "come and go" (see p. xxxvi). Child mortality rates were high, the majority of children dying in early childhood. If a series of such deaths took place in a family, it was believed that the same wicked spirit was being born and dying over and over again, spitefully grieving its parents. What is done to break the cycle of birth and death (Ch. 9)? Why does Ekwefi prize her daughter Ezinma so highly? What attitudes toward children does it reflect? How does the Igbo belief in ogbanje and the efforts to break the cycle of birth and death contrast to the "enigma" of "throwing away" of twins. Does Achebe seem to validate the belief in ogbanje?
18. Consider the case of Ikemefuna, "What is the purpose of the taking of Ikemefuna? How does he come to stay in Okonkwo's home? What is Okonkwo's relationship with Ikemefuna? Compare Okonkwo's feelings to Nwoye's affection for Ikemefuna? Why is Okonkwo disappointed with his son Nwoye?" How has Nwoye begun to "act like a man" (Ch. 7)? What values does Okonkwo associate with manliness? How does Nwoye relate to these values? What are the reasons and circumstances of Ikemefuna's death? Why does Okonkwo act as he does, despite the advice of others not to participate in the killing of Ikemefuna (Ch. 7)? How does Nwoye feel and (re)act? Compare Okonkwo's attitude toward Nwoye to Okonkwo's attitude toward his daughter Ezinma (presented in Ch. 8).
19. Most traditional African cultures have considered twins magical or cursed: see the discussion pp. xxxvi-xxxvii. Twins are in fact unusually common among the Igbo, and some subgroups value them highly. However, the people of Umuofia do not and "throw" twins "away," though children are valued highly by the Igbo. We learn this shortly after Ikemefuna's death is recounted. What do Nwoye and Obierika think of these aspects of Umuofia culture?
20. Consider the marriage customs of the Igbo depicted in *Things Fall Apart*. Paul Briens points out that Bride-price or bridewealth is "the converse of dowry. Common in many African cultures, it involves the bridegroom's family paying substantial wealth in cash or goods for the privilege of marrying a young woman. . . . Young women were considered marriageable in their mid-teens. Why do you think this attitude arose? It is worth noting that European women commonly married between 15 and 18 in earlier times. There is nothing uniquely African about these attitudes." Review the discussion of "Igbo Marriage Customs," pp. xxx-xxxii: what is suggested about the value of women in such a system? Compare Igbo marriage customs to ours in the U.S.: what are the advantages and disadvantages of each system? In Ch. 12, how is the importance of family emphasized in the Uri ceremony, when the bridewealth is paid?
21. How are white men first introduced into the story? Why might Africans suppose that they have no toes? What sorts

of attitudes do the Africans express about white men?

22. The egwugwu ceremony of the Igbo is dramatized in Ch. 10. Paul Briens believes that "the women clearly know on some level that these mysterious beings are their men folk in disguise, yet they are terrified of them when they become egwugwu": why? Review "Social and Political Structures," pp. xxii-xxx, including "The Acquisition of Titles and the Council of Chiefs" and "Secret Societies." Who are the egwugwu and what are the functions of the ceremony? Compare the Igbo system of judgment in domestic affairs with that of the U.S.
23. Notice that the song sung at the end of the chapter 12 is a new one: "the latest song in the village." As Paul Briens points out, Achebe may be reminding us that even "traditional" Igbo culture is not frozen or timeless, but dynamic and constantly changing .
24. Having shown us an engagement ceremony in Ch. 12, Achebe depicts a funeral in Ch. 13. Paul Briens notes that we seem to be "systematically introduced to the major rituals of Igbo life. How does the one-handed egwugwu praise the dead man?" What do we learn from the depiction of the funeral ceremony? What tragic incident forces Okonkwo into exile?
25. Already in Part I of the story, internal rivalries and disagreements have begun to erode the unity and integrity of the village. What are these internal conflicts? What part does the village leader Okonkwo play in the dissension? How does Okonkwo jeopardize his own authority within his community?
26. Part I presents Igbo life and culture before the coming of the white man and colonialism. In what way(s) can Things Fall Apart be considered a "response" to depictions of Africans in Western literature such as Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness--or other images of Africa as portrayed in the Western media, film, books, etc., that you are familiar with? How does Achebe's novel "correct" such European depictions of Africa and Africans, and offer you an Afrocentric (Africa-centered), rather than a Eurocentric (or Western-centered), perspective? (See Achebe's "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*")
27. Even as Achebe works to educate his readers about African culture and to combat demeaning stereotypes, he does not present Igbo society as ideal or perfect. The portrait of this culture on the eve of its "falling apart" in Part I of Things Fall Apart is complex, sometimes contradictory and critical. What aspects of pre-colonial Igbo culture does Achebe seem to question or criticize? How does Achebe use characters like Obierika, Okonkwo, and Nwoye to offer such social criticism of Igbo society? How do the people of Umuofia react to change?
28. Describe your initial reading experience and response(s) to Things Fall Apart Part I as a cross-cultural encounter: how are you responding to this exposure to traditional Igbo culture and people? Why do you think you are responding as you are? What seems most different and/or foreign to you? What seems most similar and/or familiar to you?

Photo of **Band playing for Mmau Masquerade**, Amuda village, featuring Isu Ochi instruments: an **udu** (pot drum), two small membrane drums, a small **ogene** (iron bell) and a whistle.

## Part II, Chs. 14-19 (pp. 91-118)

1. At the beginning of Part II, Okonkwo has fled his "fatherland" Umuofia for committing a "female" ochu, and he has taken his family to his "motherland" Mbanta. Why? And why does Okonkwo despair? How does his mother's brother Uchendu respond to Okonkwo in his despair?
2. In his speech to Okonkwo and other family members, Uchendu cites a song (a dirge) sung when a woman dies very like the closing lines of Oedipus Rex, the great classical Greek tragedy. Many literary critics have noted several similarities between Things Fall Apart and **classical tragedies like Oedipus and Hamlet in the European tradition**.

Achebe was asked in one interview: "How do you respond to critics reading Okonkwo as a hero in terms of Aristotle's concept of tragedy?"

Achebe replied: "No. I don't think I was responding to that particular format. This is not, of course, to say that there is no relationship between these. If we are to believe what we are hearing these days the Greeks did not drop from the sky. They evolved in a certain place which was very close to Africa ... I think a lot of what Aristotle says makes sense" (Rowell 97; see also n. 15 in Begam).

Read the description of Western tragedy and the tragic hero below, based on Aristotle's definition, then consider these questions: In what ways do you see the plot of Things Fall Apart and the character of its protagonist Okonkwo as adhering to the conventions of **Western tragedy** and the **tragic hero**? In what ways do they depart from the Aristotelian model?

**Tragedy** may be defined as dramatic narrative in which serious and important actions turn out disastrously for the protagonist or **tragic hero**. The classical Western tragic hero is the main character of great importance to his state or culture and is conventionally of noble birth and high social station, the ruler or an important leader in his society. The moral health of the state is identified with, and dependent on, that of its ruler, and so the tragic hero's story is also that of his state. Such heroes are **mixed** characters, neither thoroughly good or thoroughly evil, yet "better" or "greater" than the rest of us are in the sense that they are of higher than ordinary moral worth and social significance. The **plot** of tragedy traces the **tragic fall** of the hero, when a disastrous change of fortune, or **reversal**, catapults him (classical tragic heroes are often male) from the heights of happiness to the depths of misery. This fall usually comes as a consequence of a **tragic flaw** in the hero's character and/or an error of judgment, although the fall may also be a product of the hero's pre-ordained destiny or fate. The gods may have prophesized this fall, and the hero's tragic flaw, sometimes in the form of a ruling passion (classically, **hubris** or overweening pride and self-confidence), may cause the hero to disregard divine law and/or try in vain to escape his fate. The tragic hero may experience a supreme moment of **recognition** of the truth of his situation and/or of his identity. The tragic hero is supposed to move us to pity, because, since he is not an evil man, his misfortune is greater than he deserves; but his story may also move us to fear or terror, because we recognize similar possibilities of flaw in our fallible natures or of errors of judgment in our own lesser lives. In the Poetics, ancient Greek theorist Aristotle also asserts that these feelings of pity and fear are purged or purified through **katharsis**: tragic representations of suffering and defeat leave an audience feeling, not depressed, but relieved and even elevated.

3. What has happened to the Abame clan? Review "The Igbo People Meet the Europeans: The Era of Informal Empire," pp. xxxix-xliv. How do Uchendu and Okonkwo account differently for the "foolishness" of the Abame? Whose reaction seems wiser in responding to new challenges to old ways of living? What does Uchendu mean when he says, "There is no story that is not true"? (ch. 15, p. 99)
4. Why does his friend Obierika visit Okonkwo in exile the first time? And the second time? What are Nwoye's motives for converting to Christianity? Trace the stages in the Africans' reactions to the Christian missionaries coming to Umuofia and Mbanta, and to the missionaries' evangelical efforts to convert the Africans. What are the sources of misunderstanding between the Igbo and the missionaries? What kinds of Africans are attracted to the new religion and why? Why does Nwoye convert to Christianity? How does Okonkwo react to Nwoye's conversion?
5. "The young church in Mbanta had a few crises early in its life" (ch. 18; p. 110). What are these crises? Why are the people of Mbanta largely content to allow the Christians to remain in their midst at this point--the end of Part II? Review "the Missionary Factor," pp. xli-xliv. What are the differences between the religion of the Mbanta people and that of the Christian missionaries?
6. Uchendu and a speech by an elder of the umunna (ch. 19; p. 118) give us insight into the changes that they have seen in recent generations of their people. What are these changes and why do they cause the elders to fear for the younger generation and the future of the clan? How might these changes prepare the way for the white man's success in imposing his rule in Africa?

[Top](#)

---

### Part III, Chs. 20-25 (pp. 121-148)

1. Why does Achebe choose to bring in the European colonial presence only in the last third of the novel?
2. How has Umuofia changed over the seven years while Okonkwo has been in exile?

3. What function do the kotma, or court messengers, serve in the new society? Contrast the white man's law and system of justice with that of traditional Umuofia society. Review "The British Annexation of Igboland: The Era of Formal Empire," pp. xliv-xlvii.
  4. Okonkwo says that they should fight the white men and "drive them from the land." Obierika responds sadly, "It is already too late" (ch. 20; p. 124)--why? How has the white man been "very clever," according to Obierika? In what ways might Obierika be considered a transitional figure between the old and the new Igbo societies?
  5. Compare the missionaries Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith. What do we learn from Akunna and Mr. Brown's discussion of religion (ch. 21, pp. 126-128)? How does Enoch set off "the great conflict between church and clan" (ch. 22, p. 131), the consequences of which lead to Okonkwo's death? What sources of misunderstanding seem to make the conflicts between the Europeans and the Africans inevitable?
  6. Why do many in Umuofia feel differently from Okonkwo about the white man's "new dispensation" (Ch. 21, p. 126)? In what ways do "religion and education" go "hand in hand" (p. 128) in strengthening the "white man's medicine"?
  7. When the egwugwu destroy Mr. Smith's church, "for the moment the spirit of the clan was pacified" (Ch. 22, p. 135). Consider the **ironic** implications of this statement later when we learn the title of the book that the District Commissioner intends to write: The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger (p. 148). [If you have read Heart of Darkness, note the parallels between this title and Mr. Smith's vision of the "world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness" (p. 130)--to Mr. Kurtz's "eloquent" 17-page pamphlet and its postscript in Heart of Darkness.]
  8. How does the District Commissioner trick the six leaders of Umuofia into jail? What is Okonkwo's reaction? Why does Okonkwo kill the messenger? Why does Okonkwo afterwards commit suicide, "an offence against the Earth" (Ch. 25, p. 147)? Why is Okonkwo isolated in the end? Do you consider Okonkwo a tragic hero?
  9. The District Commissioner decides that "The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading," if not for a whole chapter, at least for "a reasonable paragraph" (p. 148). How do you think the District Commissioner would write Okonkwo's story in this paragraph? In contrast, Achebe has made Okonkwo's story the subject of a whole novel: why?
10. **Now that you've finished reading *Things Fall Apart* . . .  
How and why did things fall apart?  
Identify what you interpret to be major theme(s) and/or messages of *Things Fall Apart*.**

11. Simon Gikandi suggests that the narrator's and "Achebe's sympathies...are not with the heroic character (...Okonkwo), but the witness or storyteller (Obierika) who refuses to endorse Okonkwo's commitment to the central doctrines of his culture or the European colonizer's arrogant use of power" (xiii). Do you agree? Why or why not?
12. Consider where and under what circumstances Achebe learned to write in the colonizer's language--English--and use Western literary genres like the realistic novel and tragedy. (See "Chinua Achebe: A Biographical Note," "Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Literature," and "Conclusions," pp. vii-xvii & xviii-xlix, in our text.)

Bruce King comments in *Introduction to Nigerian Literature*: "Achebe was the first Nigerian writer to successfully transmute the conventions of the novel, a European art form, into African literature. Achebe makes Western literary forms serve African values. For example, King notes, in an Achebe novel "European character study is subordinated to the portrayal of communal life; European economy of form is replaced by an aesthetic appropriate to the rhythms of traditional tribal life." Do you agree?

Read the quotation of literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin below, and consider for what different purpose(s) Achebe has "appropriated"\* the white man's education, language, and literary forms in order to make them his "own."

"Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he **appropriates** the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other

people's intentions: **it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own.**"-- Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination*

Consider, too, critic Susan Gallagher's account below wherein Achebe discusses why he chose not to write or translate *Things Fall Apart* into "Union Igbo." What does Achebe use the "weapon" of the English language to accomplish in *Things Fall Apart*?

"In response to the now infamous declaration of Kenyan writer **Ngugi wa Thiong'o** that African writers should write in African languages, Achebe commented [in a talk at West Chester Univ.]: **'The British did not push language into my face while I was growing up.'** He chose to learn English and eventually to write in English as a means of **'infiltrating the ranks of the enemy and destroying him from within.'**....**'It doesn't matter what language you write in, as long as what you write is good,'** Achebe stated....Yet Achebe fully recognizes that English is symbolically and politically connected with the despoiler of traditional culture with intolerance and bigotry. **'Language is a weapon, and we use it,' he argued. 'There's no point in fighting a language'**" (qtd. in Gallagher ).

"When someone asked if *Things Fall Apart* had ever been translated into Igbo, Achebe's mother tongue, he shook his head and explained that Igbo exists in numerous dialects, differing from village to village. Formal, standardized, written Igbo -- like many other African languages -- came into being as a result of the Christian missionaries' desire to translate the Bible into indigenous tongues. Unfortunately, when the Christian Missionary Society tackled Igbo,...they brought together six Igbo converts, each from a different location, each speaking a different dialect." The resulting **'Union Igbo'** bore little relationship to any of the six dialects--"a strange hodge-podge with no linguistic elegance, natural rhythm or oral authenticity"--yet the missionaries authorized it as the official written form of the Igbo languages. Achebe would not consent to have his novel translated into this "linguistic travesty" Union Igbo. "Consequently, one of the world's great novels, which has been translated into more than 30 languages, is unable to appear in the language of the very culture that it celebrates and mourns. This irony seems an apt symbol for the complex ways Western Christianity has both blessed and marred the cultures of Africa" (Gallagher ).

13. Achebe has integrated traditional Igbo/African elements in his novel—e.g., proverbs, parables, and stories from Igbo oral tradition and culture--and, as noted earlier, created a kind of "African English." What effect(s) does this cross-cultural combination of Western literary forms and Igbo/African creative expression produce?
14. Achebe rejects the Western notion of art for its own sake in essays he has published (e.g. in the collections ***Morning Yet on Creation Day*** and ***Hopes and Impediments***). Instead Achebe embraces the conception of art at the heart of African oral traditions and values: "art is, and always was, at the service of man," Achebe has written. "Our ancestors created their myths and told their stories with a human purpose;" hence, "any good story, any good novel, should have a message, should have a purpose." How, then, would you interpret the human purpose(s) and message(s) of *Things Fall Apart*?
15. Consider how Achebe envisions his role as **African storyteller**, drawing upon the statements Achebe has made on the value and functions of literature and storytelling, as well as other sources available to you. These statements guide us to understanding the author's intentions in writing a novel like *Things Fall Apart*. Select some statements that seem particularly relevant and helpful to understanding the novel, and explain why.

[Top](#)

---

## Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." *The Massachusetts Review* 18.4 (Winter 1977): 782-94.

Rpt. Achebe, Chinua. *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*.1988. New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1990. 1-20.

Rpt. *Heart of Darkness: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays*

*in Criticism*. 3rd ed. Ed. Robert Kimbrough. New York: W. W. Norton, 1988. 251-262.

Rpt. *Novels for Students*, Vol. 2. Rpt. *Gale Literature Resource Center*. 2003.

Central Oregon Community College, Bend, OR. 23 May 2003.

**Cora's Online Reserve (password restricted):**

[http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci\\_articles/achebe/achebeonconrad.htm](http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci_articles/achebe/achebeonconrad.htm)

Achebe, Chinua. *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. 1988. New York : Anchor-Doubleday, 1990. [COCC Library: PR9387.9.A3 H6 1990]

Achebe, Chinua. *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays*. London: Heinemann, 1975.

**NOTE: *Morning Yet on Creation Day*** is currently out of print, but five of its important essays are reprinted in ***Hopes and Impediments***, which is still in print: "The Novelist as Teacher" (1965), "Language and the Destiny of Man" (1972) "Named for Victoria, Queen of England" (1973), "Thoughts on the African Novel" (1973), and "Colonialist Criticism" (1974).

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. [First published 1958.] Expanded edition with notes. 1996. London: Heinemann, 2000.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Eds. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson. Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 1981.

Begam, Richard. "Achebe's Sense of an Ending: History and Tragedy in *Things Fall Apart*." *Studies in the Novel* 29.3(Fall 1997): 396(16pp). Rpt. *Infotrac 2000 Expanded Academic ASAP*: Article A20503127; and *EBSCOHost Academic Search Elite*: Article No. 9712126215.

Brians, Paul (Dept. of English, Washington State University, Pullman, WA: [brians@wsu.edu](mailto:brians@wsu.edu)). "Things Fall Apart Study Guide." 2002. 11 August 2004  
<<http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/anglophone/achebe.html>>.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. [First published: 1899, 3-part serial, *Blackwood's Magazine*; 1902, rev. Blackwood.]

**NOTE:** *Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, esteemed a classic of Western literature, is widely reprinted and frequently appears in anthologies of English and Western world literature. Cora Agatucci's study guide for Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, referencing one anthology in which the novel appears, may be accessed at:

<http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/eng109/HeartSG.htm>

Gallagher, Susan VanZanten. "Linguistic Power: Encounter with Chinua Achebe." *The Christian Century* 12 March 1997, 260(2pp). *Infotrac 2000 Expanded Academic ASAP*: Article A19241297.

Rowell, Charles H. "An Interview with Chinua Achebe." *Callaloo* 13.1 (1990).

[Top](#)

---

**You are here: [Things Fall Apart Study Guide](#)**

**URL of this page: <http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/achebTFA.htm>**

**Last Updated: 31 August 2008**

**African Authors: Chinua Achebe [Table of Contents](#):**

**[Achebe Bibliography](#) | [Achebe in His Own Words](#): Quotations, Interviews, Works**

**[Achebe's Things Fall Apart: Reading & Study Questions](#) | [Achebe WWW Links](#)**

**[COCC Home](#) > [Cora Agatucci Home](#) > [Classes](#) > [HUM 211 Course Home Page](#)**

**Copyright © 1997 - 2008, Cora Agatucci, Professor of English  
Humanities Department, Central Oregon Community College**

**Please address comments on web contents & links to: Email Cora [cagatucci@cocc.edu](mailto:cagatucci@cocc.edu)**

**If you experience technical problems with this web, please contact: web help**