

Introduction to *Things Fall Apart*

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.*
W.B. Yeats

General Introduction: It is from Yeats' apocalyptic poem foreseeing savagery overtaking society that the title of Achebe's novel is taken. This novel, through its simplistic yet noble prose, addresses the nature of the African countries that had previously been depicted as savage. Achebe reveals an ancient and important culture based on tradition and ceremony. This is a somewhat primitive land, but there is a method and complicated set of cultural customs behind it; it is not the voiceless forest as Conrad depicts in *Heart of Darkness*.

Things Fall Apart: Okonkwo, our protagonist, is the most physically powerful man in the surrounding villages. However, that which makes him physically dominant is exactly what leads to his downfall. His inability to mediate the rules and customs and society with the physical dominance he possesses relinquishes him to a position of weakness. This reads almost like a Greek tragedy: simple, powerful, and emotional.

Major characters:

- Okonkwo-protagonist, son of Unoka (not physically gifted)
- Nwoye- son of Okonkwo, more like his grandfather (Unoka) than his father
- Ezinma-daughter of Okonkwo, bold and strong for a woman

(There are many other characters, and the names are sometimes difficult to understand. Do not feel overwhelmed by the names, the more they are repeated, the more familiar they become)

Major themes:

- change and tradition
- masculinity
- language as cultural difference
- impact of colonialism
- the impact of parentage

Symbols:

- locusts
- fire
- animals

Major questions

How are the Ibo cultural traditions both a help and a hindrance to the people of Umuofia? How are cultural traditions of our society a help and a hindrance to us?

What presumptions are made about the reader? Are customs explained? If not, why?

What are Okonkwo's virtues? What is his tragic flaw (*hamartia*)?

How does the simplicity of the prose belie the complexity of the culture?