

Things Fall Apart Study Guide

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For the novel
by Chinua Achebe



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Synopsis

Okonkwo lives with his Ibo clansmen in a Nigerian village in the late 1800s. Driven by fear that he will be considered a failure like his father, he is determined to show himself stronger, tougher, more violent, and more honorable than anyone else. He works hard at growing yams, the “man’s crop”; fights hard, bringing back his enemies’ skulls; and takes two titles—signs of power and honor which involve generously giving to the community. He marries three wives and has eight children, all of whom he tries to keep under strict control. A fiercely proud and short-tempered man, Okonkwo fears becoming a failure in the eyes of his community.

The author of *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe, introduces the complex rules, patterns, values, and rituals of Okonkwo’s society. The Ibo people love dance, music, and wrestling matches. Achebe weaves their vivid language, proverbs, and stories into the novel. The 10,000 men of the clan meet together to seek peaceful solutions to problems with other clans. Elders wisely resolve disputes within the clan. On the other hand, the priestess and her Oracle hold the power of life and death. Many children die young, and twin babies are “thrown away” in the forest. When the Oracle demands that an innocent boy hostage be killed, the men of the village immediately obey.

At a funeral celebration Okonkwo’s gun explodes and he accidentally kills a boy. He is exiled from the clan for seven years. Going to his mother’s kinsmen, losing his place and possessions in his village, he begins to struggle with some aspects of his society. But when vast changes begin with the arrival of white missionaries, he closes his heart against new ideas.

Okonkwo returns to his village, where a missionary ministers to a small flock of believers. This wise and godly man is replaced by another missionary, less sensitive to local traditions, who helps to provoke a conflict between the young believers and other men of the village. When a white administrator and corrupt soldiers, contemptuous and ignorant of the complex rules of Okonkwo’s society, get involved in the conflict, they humiliate the community and bring tragedy to Okonkwo. Things have fallen apart, and Okonkwo’s world is changed forever.

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Ibo Food: West African yams are large starchy tubers (underground stems), usually a foot long or more, brown on the outside and dry, white, and stringy on the inside. A staple food in West Africa, they can be eaten roasted, fried, or boiled, or they can be cut up, boiled, and pounded into a firm mass eaten with stew or soup. They were usually grown only by men. Women could grow coco-yams (brown root vegetables also called taro), beans, and cassava (kuh SAH vuh); a shrub with thick roots, also called manioc, which is fermented. Coco-yams and cassava were boiled and pounded before they were eaten.

Vocabulary:

Replace each word with an appropriate synonym from the Word Box below.

Word Box:

skill	dust storm	evil intent	meantime
threatening	whimsical	hawk	tenant farming
beginning	knife	seashells (money)	

1. “Okonkwo’s fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan (_____).”
2. “When they had eaten they talked about . . . the impending (_____) war with the village of Mbaino.”
3. “In short, he was asking Unoka to return the two hundred cowries (_____) he had borrowed from him more than two years before.”
4. “To crown it all he had taken two titles and shown incredible prowess (_____) in two inter-tribal wars.”
5. “. . . there was no hurry to decide his fate. Okonkwo was, therefore, asked on behalf of the clan to look after him in the interim (_____).”
6. “It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious (_____) gods and of magic . . . and of the forces of nature, malevolent (_____), red in tooth and claw.”

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11. Why are neighboring villages afraid of the village of Umuofia?

12. Who is Nwoye? How does Okonkwo treat him?

Analysis:

13. *Foreshadowing* is a hint or clue an author gives about something that may happen later in a story. How does the author foreshadow what is going to happen to Ikemefuna?

14. A *flashback* is a plot device in which an author pauses in his narrative to present a scene that occurred earlier in the story or before the story began. It is often used to give new insight into a character or explain an element in the plot. How does Achebe use flashbacks to reveal different aspects of Okonkwo's life?

15. *Similes* and *metaphors* are figures of speech that state or imply a comparison between two unlike things that have something in common. A simile uses words such as *like* or *as* to compare. One thing is said to be *like* another thing. A metaphor does not use these comparison words. One thing is said to *be* another thing.

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Achebe often uses vivid images to communicate his ideas, such as “Okonkwo’s fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan” and “Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.” Which of these statements is a simile and which is a metaphor? What does the first tell you about Okonkwo’s reputation? What does the second tell you about the use of proverbs?

Dig Deeper:

*Cultural Responses to Sin**

Sin prompts three basic responses in people: shame, fear, and guilt. Because these responses are uncomfortable, people try to find ways to avoid them. Ideally we should avoid sin and turn to God in repentance, asking for forgiveness; but in our fallen state we try to find our own ways of coping. As a general rule, people focus on achieving honor to avoid shame, achieving power to overcome fear, and obeying laws or rules to avoid guilt. However, the Bible teaches that only by turning to and obeying God can we rid ourselves of the shame, fear, and guilt caused by our sin. All cultures include all three responses to sin, but most cultures tend to stress the importance of one or two.

Shame-based Societies. Many cultures of the Muslim world and Far East focus primarily on honor and shame. In such cultures, people are primarily concerned with maintaining their honor within their community. People can be punished or influenced by publicly shaming them; social pressure is very strong. One person’s actions can bring shame on the whole community, so the community may be involved in punishing that person to purge the shame. When possible, shameful acts are covered up by the person, his family, or the community. If that is not possible, severe shame may be dealt with by executing the offender, taking vengeance on outsiders who have shamed the group, or by the offender committing suicide. More minor offenses may be dealt with by mediation leading to restitution (payment to the offended party) or other punishments.

* The concepts introduced in this section are influenced by, and are examined in much greater detail in, *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door*, by Roland Muller (2001, Xlibris Corp.).

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24. In the Bible we find all the motivations mentioned above. According to the Bible, our sins should cause us to feel shame *and* fear *and* guilt, and God redeems us with honor, power, and righteousness. Look up the following verses and, in the blank provided, indicate the category that the passage addresses: H for honor or shame; P for power or fear; R for righteousness or guilt.

Exodus 20:12	_____	2 Timothy 1:7	_____
Romans 3:19–20	_____	1 John 4:13–18	_____
Hebrews 12:2	_____	Galatians 6:7–9	_____
Isaiah 53:3	_____	Romans 8:15	_____
Romans 5:19	_____		

Optional Activity:

1. You may want to read the book *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door*, by Roland Muller, to explore this issue further. Give a short oral presentation summarizing the issues examined in the book, the author's conclusions, and your reactions to the author's conclusions.

Things Fall Apart Study Guide Answer Key

Chapters 14–16

Vocabulary:

1. fascinated; 2. translator; 3. deep in the bones; 4. immature; 5. insolent; 6. believers; 7. contemptible; 8. heretical; 9. total destruction; 10. exclude

Questions:

1. He is older, without vigor and energy. Also, he is in despair from being cast out of his village, and the work does not seem to have long-term benefits anymore.
2. The questions Uchendu asks Okonkwo are, “Why do they say ‘Mother is supreme?’” and “Why are women buried with their own kinsmen?” Uchendu tells Okonkwo that your mother is your protection; she gives refuge and sympathy in times of trouble.
3. His despair will displease his dead mother; his duty is to comfort his wives and children and bring them back to his fatherland after seven years so they don’t die in exile; and he’s not the only one in the world to suffer.
4. Obierika brings cowries, money from the sale of Okonkwo’s yams, so Okonkwo will have money to live on.
5. The village of Abame has been totally destroyed by white men and native soldiers. The people of Abame were visited by a white man they could not understand. When they consulted their Oracle, the Oracle said the white man would bring destruction on the village and many more white men would follow him. In an effort to avoid the foretold destruction they killed the white man, but others came later and destroyed the village in response to the first man’s death.
6. Answers may vary. Both stories have a white man on a bicycle who apparently ends up in the wrong place, the villagers misunderstand who he is and what he wants, they kill him, and a white man or men come with native soldiers and kill many of the villagers, apparently without speaking with the people to ascertain what happened and why.
7. The story warns against attacking before you know the strength of your enemy. Uchendu is suggesting that people should not respond to the unknown before they have gained some understanding of it.
8. He has heard there are white men who make powerful guns and strong drink and take slaves. The story seemed too unlikely to believe. Now he knows there really are white men, they kill people, and he is afraid of what they will do to his people.
9. They think the new religion will not last. The converts are people who are not respected in the village.
10. The missionaries’ song about “brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul. . . . He felt a relief as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth.” He felt as if their words were answering questions for which there seemed to be no answers in the Ibo religion.

Analysis:

11. Examples of anthropomorphism may include: “the sun had been gathering strength till it seemed to breathe a breath of fire”; “Evergreen trees wore a dusty coat of brown”; “the world lay panting”; “under the live, vibrating heat”; “the wind combed their leaves into flying crests like strange and fantastic coiffure”; “an angry, metallic and thirsty clap [of thunder]”; “The earth quickly came to life.”