

Things Fall Apart Study Guide

by Brenda S. Cox

For the novel by Chinua Achebe



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by Brenda S. Cox

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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.

Chapters 1–3

*Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man.
But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness.*

Background Information:

Although Achebe is writing in English, he uses many Ibo terms, especially for things unique to Ibo culture. Most editions of *Things Fall Apart* have a glossary in the back of the book; refer to it for unfamiliar terms.

The following explanations also may be helpful:

- *Cowry shells* were kept on strings of six shells each and used as money in West Africa. A bag of 24,000 cowries weighed about 60 pounds.
- “*Medicine*” refers to magic, ritual spells, and sacred objects.
- The *harmattan* is a storm of very fine dust that blows down into Nigeria from the Sahara Desert during the dry season (European winter). It covers the sun, cools the atmosphere, and, like a fog, prevents people from seeing very far. One man who has lived in an Ibo area describes the impact of the harmattan: “Harmattan season is the coolest season of the year. When you are living in 90 degree weather all the time, your blood is so thin that a drop of 10 or 15 degrees (during the harmattan) makes you very cold. During harmattan, almost everyone catches a cold, your lips get chapped, some people even die. . . If this seems shocking, consider that houses are not insulated: heat comes from the sun or a fire and cool comes from a breeze or a bath. Clothes are not thick enough to protect from this drop in temperature. In short, harmattan is one of the harshest seasons of the year.”
- The *Ibo week* had four days: *Eke*, *Oye*, *Afo*, and *Nkwo*.
- *Kola* is a bitter nut, full of caffeine, which was broken and eaten ceremonially with a black pepper called alligator pepper.

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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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7. “Okonkwo’s first son . . . was already causing his father great anxiety for his incipient (_____) laziness.”
8. “You, Unoka, are known in all the clan for the weakness of your machete (_____) and your hoe.”
9. “Let the kite (_____) perch and let the eagle perch too.”
10. “Sharecropping (_____) was a very slow way of building up a barn of one’s own.”

Proverbs:

In literature, proverbs can help the reader understand cultural values and beliefs. In *Things Fall Apart*, the author uses many proverbs to give insight into Nigerian culture. Connect the following Nigerian proverbs with similar English proverbs. Look at the Nigerian proverbs in context in the book if necessary.

Ibo proverbs:

- ___ 1. “The sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them.”
- ___ 2. “If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings.”
- ___ 3. “Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break.”
- ___ 4. “A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing.”
- ___ 5. “The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did.”
- ___ 6. “Eneke the bird says that since men have learned to shoot without missing, he has learned to fly without perching.”
- ___ 7. “An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb.”

English meanings, or similar English proverbs:

- a. “The more the merrier.” There’s room enough for everybody.
- b. “First come, first served”; or “The early bird gets the worm.”
- c. “You have to go with the flow,” or, you have to adapt to the circumstances.

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6. What fears dominate Okonkwo's life?

7. What is the one passion that rules Okonkwo?

8. Compare and contrast Okonkwo and his father. List at least four ways in which Okonkwo and his father are different.

Questions:

1. What does Okoye ask Unoka? How does Unoka answer him?

2. There are four "titles" in Ibo society: *ozo*, *idemili*, *omalo*, and *erulu*. These chapters mention that Okoye is going to take the *idemili* title, Unoka has no titles, and Okonkwo has two titles. Examine what the book says about taking titles. What do they give a man? What do they cost him?

3. The village meeting begins, "*Umuofia kwenu!*" *Umuofia* means *children of the countryside*, the areas not affected by foreigners. *Kwenu* means *united*, or *agreed*. Why do you think the meetings always begin with this call and a united response from all those present?

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4. How many villages, and how many men, are in Umuofia? How does the village communicate news? How are problems solved?

5. How do the people of Umuofia determine if a war is just or not just? How do they attempt to avoid war?

6. What is the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves? Why do people go there?

7. How did Unoka die? Why was he not buried?

8. When Okonkwo begins sharecropping (planting someone else's seed-yams to be repaid by a share of the crop), why does Nwakibie trust Okonkwo with his seed-yams?

9. What difficulties happen during Okonkwo's first year of sharecropping? How does Okonkwo respond to the difficulties? How do others respond?

10. Why are the people of Umuofia afraid of darkness?

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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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16. What aspects of a shame-based culture do you observe in Umuofia? How do people attain honor? What shames them?

17. What aspects of honor and shame do you see in your own culture?

Fear-based Societies: Cultures that focus on fear generally are based on or heavily influenced by animism (a belief that spirits inhabit natural objects) and magic. These cultures are often found in Africa, Central and South America, and some Pacific islands. They often focus on the fear of spirits, gods, demons, ghosts, and ancestors, as well as outsiders. They may establish rules and customs or taboos to protect people from harm by these spirits, and they may have ritual procedures, such as sacrifices and rites of passage, to please the spirits or appease offended powers. Often, designated religious representatives such as witch doctors or shamans wield great power through fear of the gods or demons with whom they claim to communicate. These cultures also emphasize the use of power in family, government, and the military to make themselves strong enough that they need not fear others.

18. What aspects of a fear-based culture do you observe in Umuofia?

19. What aspects of fear and power do you see in the culture in which you live?

Guilt-based Societies: Cultures that focus primarily on guilt are those heavily influenced by the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions and thought, such as North

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America, Europe, and Australia. These cultures focus on guilt versus innocence and unlawful versus lawful. Such societies tend to codify behavior to determine what is permissible—to define “right” behavior by rules and laws. They may talk about what is legal rather than what is honorable or ethical. A personal code of conduct, but a depersonalized—or “objective”—set of laws, is common in these cultures. Ironically, a common opposite response to guilt is to deny that there is *any* true standard of behavior by saying truth is relative and individual, and therefore there really is no such thing as guilt.

20. What aspects of a guilt-based society do you see reflected in Umuofia?

21. What aspects of a guilt-based society do you see in your own culture?

Overview:

22. Which of the three responses to sin most closely resembles the culture in which you live?

23. Which motivates you personally—shame, fear, or guilt? For example: If you were tempted to cheat on an entrance exam, which reason would stop you?

- a. The rules forbid cheating and you would feel guilty.
- b. You fear being caught and punished.
- c. If someone finds out, you will feel humiliated.

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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.

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Chapters 11–13

Vocabulary:



Questions:

1. The moral of the story of the tortoise and the birds might be, as the tortoise says, “a man who makes trouble for others is also making it for himself.” It also might be “the last shall be first and the first shall be last” or “don’t be greedy.”
2. Chielo comes to Okonkwo’s compound in the night and says Agbala wants to see Ezinma. She takes her on a long walk around the village and finally enters Agbala’s cave with her. The story does not say why Agbala wants to see Ezinma or what happens in the cave, but in the morning Chielo brings her out and returns her to the compound.
3. A large number of women help Obierika’s wife with cooking for the feast; the women all gather to take back the cow that escapes its pen; at the wedding the community witnesses the vows together, eat and drink together, dance together.
4. Obierika’s in-laws bring 50 pots of palm wine. The 50 pots of wine show that the bride is worthy of a great celebration.
5. The death of Ezeudu.
6. The villagers drum, dance, and wail; men fire guns and cannon, jump around in a frenzy, clash machetes, and cut down animals and plants; the *egwugwu* “spirits” appear and speak.
7. Okonkwo’s gun explodes and kills Ezeudu’s 16-year-old son.
8. Because Okonkwo kills Ezeudu’s 16-year-old son, he has to leave the clan for seven years, because “it was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman.”
9. Friends and relatives of Ezeudu demolish the huts and walls and burn them, and they kill his animals. The earth goddess has demanded this punishment to whoever kills a clansman to “cleanse the land” of the killing.

Analysis:

10. At the end of the first paragraph of Chapter 11, Achebe writes that “the nights were as black as charcoal,” and at the end of the second paragraph he writes that “each hut seen from the others looked like a soft eye of yellow half-light set in the solid massiveness of night.” You may wish to note that the description of the night as charcoal carries with it not only the imagery of blackness, but also solidity, which is reinforced in the second description of the “*solid* massiveness of night” (emphasis added). Also, though the yellow light may be comforting, when described as an “eye of yellow half-light,” it may carry with it a hint of threat—reflected yellow eyes in the darkness usually means a predator is watching.
11. The story of the tortoise and the birds explains why the tortoise has a shell that looks as if it is patched together.
12. When Okonkwo joins Ekwefi by the cave, he mocks her because he doesn’t want to appear to be too sensitive or caring—he considers that effeminate. But his appearance there demonstrates that he obviously does care for them.
13. Answers may vary. One of the goals of such marriages and such rituals may be to increase ties and relationships between villages and families. The more closely tied together families and villages are, the less likelihood of stress and conflict.
14. Answers may vary. The irony is that Okonkwo was one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Umuofia and is now outcast for seven years. He worked hard for many years for his success, and everyone said his *chi* was destined for success. But instead, through a complete accident, Okonkwo loses everything in one day.

Dig Deeper:

15. Answers will vary. Chielo never states a reason for taking Ezinma and never explains what she does with her. There does not seem to be any real point to the action—no pronouncement is made to the family or community, no consequence comes from the event. However, the student may note that when Chielo comes to Okonkwo’s compound she demands Ezinma and warns both Okonkwo and Ekwefi about presuming to talk with, question, or even to come see the god Agbala unless he proposes it. The event may simply be an exercise in reminding the people of Umuofia that the god

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and his priestess have the power to do as they wish with them. Agbala can come to them when and as he wishes and demand even their children for unknown purposes. The visit may have been designed to increase or reinforce their fear and awe of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves. Achebe may be using this event to demonstrate the fear in which the people live and the randomness of their gods and lives.

16. Answers will vary. Chielo's culture probably would say that she was possessed by her god. Students are scripturally justified in saying that she might have been possessed by a demon or spirit.

17. All of these verses describe people who were possessed by spirits, but who were cleansed or released by Jesus or the apostles. The passage in Deuteronomy 13 describes a prophet who *does* tell the truth or who performs a valid miracle, but who then attempts to lead the people astray by giving credit to someone other than God. The Acts passage describes a slave girl who apparently accurately foretells the future—at the very least she is telling the truth about Paul and Silas. The test of a godly spirit is not necessarily whether the things it says are accurate, but whether they are accurate *and* point to and glorify God. The Deuteronomy 18 passage tells us a prophet from God will *always* be accurate. Note also in Matthew 24:24–25 and Revelation 13:11–14, prophecies concerning what is commonly called “the end times,” Jesus and John describe people doing miraculous things to deceive the world. Even more effectively than outright lies, truth and miracles may be misused and twisted to evil.

18. These quotations imply that the Ibo believe in reincarnation—that people can be reborn to live another life. The discussion of the *ogbanje* is very clear that they are reborn. However, the passage from Chapter 13 does not state it directly; the implication is most clear in the sentence, “So I shall ask you to come again the way you came before.” The passage from Hebrews states that “man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” We live this life and at death move into the next life; there is no coming back for another life or another chance.

19. a. Okonkwo's people believed Okonkwo's actions defiled the earth with the blood of his clansman. The consequences are not spelled out, but seem to be dire and widespread: “It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. . . . And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offense against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender.” There are two parts to the cleansing. First, “a man who committed it [the defilement] must flee from the land”: Okonkwo had to leave for at least seven years. Second, “They set fire to his houses, demolished his red wall, killed his animals and destroyed his barn”: They had to wipe away the traces of the offender by destroying his possessions in his compound.

b. Uncleanliness or defilement could come from childbirth, infectious skin diseases, bodily discharges including a woman's monthly period, touching a dead body, seeking mediums and spiritists; killing people in battle; eating forbidden foods; idolatry; disobeying God's law. People were cleansed by time, ceremonial washing, sacrifices, and sometimes exile.

c. In these verses, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, sacrificing children to idols, and bloodshed can defile the land itself. The consequences are exile from the land. The teacher may wish to note that these verses are discussing habitual practice of these sins, not individual incidents.

d. These verses say that Jesus has paid for our sins; he cleanses us by his blood. He fulfilled the law by obeying it—living without sin—and then he died for our sins as the final sacrifice. His perfect sacrifice completely paid for all sins.

e. In the Matthew passage, Jesus makes clear that not only are we to obey the letter of the law, but we are to obey by not even having such thoughts. The thoughts themselves pollute or defile us; this is what he was referring to in the Mark 7 passage above. God is concerned with the purity of our actions, but he is even more concerned with the purity of our hearts and motives. The statements of Jesus were not truly new concepts—God had repeatedly said the same things through his prophets. Even the books of the law repeatedly refer to doing what is right and just.

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.