

Why does Okonkwo hang himself?

Is Okonkwo a traditional or a modern tragic hero? (hubris / tragedy of the common man, but is he a common man? Reversion to classical tragedy. He is too proud of himself as a warrior / his fear of femininity or appearing effeminate)

What is the message of the novel?

What does the District Commissioner's decision to include Okonkwo's death in his book mean?

Write an essay about the novel as a postcolonial work of literature.

Okonkwo's character sketch

Is the village divided as to their attitude towards the colonizer?

Attitude towards women in the novel

Why did Achebe write this novel in English?

Religious conversion as a means of escape

The generation gap: the old resist change (the colonizer), the new welcome the colonizer

Ethnographic distance: "Is it me?"

Igbo social structure unlike the colonizer: no class distinction. Poor man can rise to power / subcultures (rich in stories, Ikemefuna tells stories)

Achebe does not glorify native culture. He shows us the good and the bad. (wife-beating)

The tortoise and the birds

Good and bad aspects of colonialism: the hospitals / the prohibition of abandoning twin newborns

Brown versus Smith as two sides of the same coin

The novel's ending is dark and ironic.

The term “ethnographic distance” refers to a method in anthropology where the anthropologists distance themselves from the culture they are studying in order to make sense of that culture. At several points in the novel, the narrator, who otherwise seems fully immersed in Igbo culture, takes a step back in order to explain certain aspects of the Igbo world to the reader. For example, when Okonkwo’s first wife calls out to Ekwefi in chapter five, Ekwefi calls back from inside her hut, “Is that me?” This response may seem strange to non-Igbo readers, so the narrator explains the cultural logic of Ekwefi’s response: “That was the way people answered calls from outside. They never answered yes for fear it might be an evil spirit calling.” The Igbo world is full of spirits that may have evil intentions, and answering “Yes” to a call from outside could inadvertently invite one such spirit inside. Throughout the book the narrator uses ethnographic distance to clarify elements of Igbo culture to a non-Igbo reader. The narrator borders two worlds: one African and one European.

Another important way in which Achebe challenges such stereotypical representations is through his use of language. As Achebe writes in his essay on Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness*, colonialist Europe tended to perceive Africa as a foil or negation of Western culture and values, imagining Africa to be a primordial land of silence. But the people of Umuofia speak a complex language full of proverbs and literary and rhetorical devices. Achebe’s translation of the Igbo language into English retains the cadences, rhythms, and speech patterns of the language without making them sound, as Conrad did, “primitive.”

Despite its focus on kinship, the Igbo social structure offers a greater chance for mobility than that of the colonizers who eventually arrive in Umuofia. Though ancestors are revered, a man’s worth is determined by his own actions. In contrast to much of continental European society during the nineteenth century, which was marked by wealth-based class divisions, Igbo culture values individual displays of prowess, as evidenced by their wrestling competitions. Okonkwo is thus able, by means of his own efforts, to attain a position of wealth and prestige, even though his father died, penniless and titleless, of a shameful illness.

Whereas the first few chapters highlight the complexity and originality of the Igbo language, in these chapters Achebe points out another aspect of Igbo culture that colonialist Europe tended to ignore: the existence of subcultures within a given African population. Each clan has its own stories, and Ikemefuna is an exciting addition to Umuofia because he brings with him new and unfamiliar folk tales. With the introduction of Ikemefuna, Achebe is able to remind us that the story we are reading is not about Africa but rather about one specific culture within Africa. He thus combats the European tendency to see all Africans as one and the same.

Achebe does not glorify native culture. He shows us the good and the bad. Although traditional Igbo culture is fairly democratic in nature, it is also profoundly patriarchal. Wife-beating is an accepted practice. Moreover, femininity is associated with weakness while masculinity is associated with strength. It is no coincidence that the word that refers to a titleless man also means “woman.” A man is not believed to be “manly” if he cannot control his women. Okonkwo frequently beats his wives, and the only emotion he allows himself to display is anger. He does not particularly like feasts, because the idleness that they involve makes him feel emasculated. Okonkwo’s frustration at this idleness causes him to act violently, breaking the spirit of the celebration.

Ekwefi tells Ezinma a story about a greedy, cunning tortoise. All of the birds have been invited to a feast in the sky and Tortoise persuades the birds to lend him feathers to make wings so that he can attend the feast as well. As they travel to the feast, Tortoise also persuades them to take new names for the feast according to custom. He tells the birds that his name will be “All of you.” When they arrive, Tortoise asks his hosts for whom the feast is prepared. They reply, “For all of you.” Tortoise proceeds to eat and drink the best parts of the food and wine. The birds, angry and disgruntled at receiving only scraps, take back the feathers that they had given to Tortoise so that he is unable to fly home. Tortoise persuades Parrot to deliver a message to his wife: he wants her to cover their compound with their soft things so that he may jump from the sky without danger. Maliciously, Parrot tells Tortoise’s wife to bring out all of the hard things. When Tortoise jumps, his shell breaks into pieces on impact. A medicine man puts it together again, which is why Tortoise’s shell is not smooth.

The story that Ekwefi tells Ezinma about Tortoise and the birds is one of the many instances in which we are exposed to Igbo folklore. The tale also seems to prepare us, like the symbolic locusts that arrive in Chapter 7, for the colonialism that will soon descend upon Umuofia. Tortoise convinces the birds to allow him to come with them, even though he does not belong. He then appropriates all of their food. The tale presents two different ways of defeating Tortoise: first, the birds strip Tortoise of the feathers that they had lent him. This strategy involves cooperation and unity among the birds. When they refuse to concede to Tortoise's desires, Tortoise becomes unable to overpower them. Parrot's trick suggests a second course of action: by taking advantage of the position as translator, Parrot outwits Tortoise.

Achebe does not present a clear-cut dichotomy of the white religion as evil and the Igbo religion as good. All along, the descriptions of many of the village's ceremonies and rituals have been tongue-in-cheek. But the Christian missionaries increasingly win converts simply by pointing out the fallacy of Igbo beliefs—for example, those about the outcasts. When the outcasts cut their hair with no negative consequence, many villagers come to believe that the Christian god is more powerful than their own. Achebe himself is the son of Nigerian Christians, and it is hard not to think of his situation, in Chapter 17, when the narrator points out Okonkwo's worry: "Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors?"

Things Fall Apart is not one-sided in its portrayal of colonialism. It presents the economic benefits of cross-cultural contact and reveals the villagers' delight in the hospital's treatment of illnesses. The sympathetic Mr. Brown urges the Igbo to send their children to school because he knows that the colonial government will rob the Igbo of self-government if they do not know the language. In essence, he urges the Igbo to adapt so that they won't lose all autonomy. Nevertheless, it is difficult to view colonialism in a tremendously positive light: suddenly the Igbo must relate to the colonial government on European terms. The story of Abame and the discussion of the new judicial system show how different the European frame of reference is from that of the *egwugwu*. The colonial government punishes individuals according to European cultural and religious values. For example, without first making an effort to understand the cultural and religious

tradition behind the practice, the government pronounces the abandonment of newborn twins a punishable crime.

At the end of Chapter 20, Obierika points out that there is no way that the white man will be able to understand Umuofia's customs without understanding its language. This idea mirrors one of Achebe's purposes in writing *Things Fall Apart*: the book serves not only to remind the West that Africa has language and culture but also to provide an understanding of Igbo culture through language. Achebe shows us the extent to which cultural and linguistic structures and practices are intertwined, and he is able to re-create in English the cadences, images, and rhythms of the speech of the Igbo people. By the time things begin to "fall apart," it becomes clear that what the colonialists have unraveled is the complex Igbo culture.

Reverend Smith causes a great deal of conflict between the church and the clan with his refusal to understand and respect traditional Igbo culture. Mr. Brown, by contrast, is far more lenient with the converts' retention of some of their old beliefs and doesn't draw as clear a line between the converts and the Igbo community. Smith, however, demands a complete rejection of the converts' old religious beliefs. The text ironically comments that he "sees things as black and white." While on the one hand this comment refers simply to an inability to grasp the gradations in a given situation, it also refers, of course, to race relations and colonial power. Interestingly, Achebe has named Smith's predecessor "Brown," as if to suggest that the latter's practice of compromise and benevolence is in some way related to his ability to see the shades between the poles of black and white. Smith, by contrast, is a stereotypical European colonialist, as the generic quality of his name reflects. His inability to practice mutual respect and tolerance incites a dangerous zealous fervor in some of the more eager converts, such as Enoch. Smith's attitude encourages Enoch to insult traditional Igbo culture.

It is in Okonkwo's nature to act rashly, and his slaying of the messenger constitutes an instinctive act of self-preservation. Not to act would be to reject his values and traditional way of life. He cannot allow himself or, by extension, his clan to be viewed as cowardly. There is certainly an element of self-destructiveness in this act, a kind of martyrdom that Okonkwo willingly embraces

because the alternative is to submit to a world, law, and new order with which he finds himself inexorably at odds.

One way of understanding Okonkwo's suicide is as the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy regarding his fear of failure. He is so afraid of ending up precisely the way he does end up that he brings about his own end in the worst manner imaginable. No one forces his hand when he slays the messenger; rather, the act constitutes a desperate attempt to reassert his manhood. The great tragedy of the situation is that Okonkwo ignores far more effective but less masculine ways to resist the colonialists. Ultimately, Okonkwo's sacrifice seems futile and empty.

The novel's ending is dark and ironic. The District Commissioner is a pompous little man who thinks that he understands indigenous African cultures. Achebe uses the commissioner, who seems a character straight out of *Heart of Darkness*, to demonstrate the inaccuracy of accounts of Africa such as Joseph Conrad's. The commissioner's misinterpretations and the degree to which they are based upon his own shortcomings are evident. He comments, for example, on the villagers' "love of superfluous words," attempting to ridicule their beautiful and expressive language. His rumination that Okonkwo's story could make for a good paragraph illustrates his shallowness. Whereas Achebe has written an entire book about Okonkwo, he suggests that a European account of Okonkwo would likely portray him as a grunting, cultureless savage who inexplicably and senselessly kills a messenger. Achebe also highlights one of the reasons that early ethnographic reports were often offensively inaccurate: when Obierika asks the commissioner to help him with Okonkwo's body, the narrator tells us that "the resolute administrator in [the commissioner] gave way to the student of primitive customs." The same people who control the natives relay the accepted accounts of colonized cultures—in a manner, of course, that best suits the colonizer's interest.