Things Fall Apart

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF CHINUA ACHEBE

Achebe was raised by his parents in the Igbo town of Ogidi in southeastern Nigeria. Although his parents were Protestant and practiced the Christian faith, Achebe and his siblings were also exposed to traditional Igbo culture, which included a heavy emphasis on storytelling. Achebe excelled in school and began writing stories as a university student. After graduation, he worked first as an English teacher in the town of Oba. Later, he worked for the Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS) in the metropolis of Lagos. He published and gained worldwide attention for *Things Fall Apart* in 1958. Over the next several decades, Achebe was involved in a mix of academia and Nigerian politics, publishing a number of short stories, children's books, and essay collections and splitting his time between Nigeria and the United States until 1990, when he returned to the US after a car accident left him partially disabled. Achebe continued to publish and held a faculty position at Brown University from 2009 until his death in 2013.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Things Fall Apart is set in 1890, during the early days of colonialism in Nigeria. Achebe depicts Igbo society in transition, from its first contact with the British colonialists to the growing dominance of British rule over the indigenous people. Literary works about this period often painted stereotypical portraits of native Africans as primitives—even works that were critical of the European colonizers, such as Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad depicted Africans as savages who were both oppressed by and excited the savagery of white Christian Europeans (see "Joseph Conrad: 'A Bloody Racist'" below). Achebe's novel is a response to these colonialist works of literature—*Things Fall Apart* is a *postcolonial* novel that strives to revise previous stereotypes by portraying both cultures with a neutral eye, focusing on the complexity of Igbo traditions.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

While Achebe was working on *Things Fall Apart*, he had very few models of African fiction written in English. Two notable exceptions were Amos Tutuola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City*. However, though Achebe appreciated the work of these fellow Nigerian writers, he worked to develop a style of his own. In 1962, Achebe also had the opportunity to attend a conference with several contemporary African writers in English, including Ghanaian poet Kofi Awoonor, Nigerian playwright and poet Wole Soyinka, and US poet Langston Hughes. At the conference, Achebe was asked to read a student's manuscript, and impressed with the work, he forwarded it to an agent. The student was Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who is now a widely recognized Kenyan writer, and the manuscript was his first published work, *Weep Not, Child*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Things Fall Apart*
- **When Written:** 1957
- **Where Written:** Nigeria
- **When Published:** 1958
- **Literary Period:** Post-colonialism
- **Genre:** Novel / Tragedy
- **Setting:** Pre-colonial Nigeria, 1890s
- **Climax:** Okonkwo's murder of a court messenger
- **Antagonist:** Missionaries and White Government Officials (Reverend Smith and the District Commissioner)
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Joseph Conrad: "A Bloody Racist". Chinua Achebe delivered a lecture and critique on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, calling Conrad "a bloody racist" and provoking controversy among critics and readers. However, Achebe's criticism of Conrad has become a mainstream perspective on Conrad's work and was even included in the 1988 Norton critical edition of *Heart of Darkness*.

Achebe as Politician. Achebe expressed his political views often in writing, but he also involved himself actively in Nigerian politics when he became the People's Redemption Party's deputy national vice-president in the early 1980's. However, he soon resigned himself in frustration with the corruption he witnessed during the elections.

PLOT SUMMARY

As a young man, Okonkwo becomes one of the greatest wrestlers in the clan. Okonkwo values strength and aggression, traits he believes are masculine, and his worst fear is to be thought of as feminine or weak, like his father, Unoka.

Okonkwo's wealth and status within the tribe grow, and he becomes one of the greatest men in the land, with three wives

and a large stock of **yams**. He treats his family with a heavy hand, believing that the only emotion worth showing is anger. Okonkwo is particularly worried about his eldest son, Nwoye, in whom he sees signs of laziness reminiscent of Unoka.

One day, the clan settles an argument with a neighboring village by demanding the sacrifice of a virgin and a 15-year-old boy named Ikemefuna, who lives with Okonkwo's family for the next three years.

While living with Okonkwo's family, Ikemefuna becomes very close to Nwoye, sharing folktales and encouraging him to enjoy masculine tasks. Okonkwo approves of his influence on Nwoye and grows fond of Ikemefuna himself. Ikemefuna soon starts to call Okonkwo "father."

After three years, when the oldest man of the tribe, Ezeudu, informs Okonkwo that Ikemefuna must be killed, he advises him not to participate in the killing, since "the boy calls you father." Okonkwo ignores this advice, fearing that others will find him weak or effeminate, and he proceeds to strike the killing blow when they take Ikemefuna out to be killed the next day.

Soon, Ezeudu passes away, and his funeral celebration draws the entire clan. During the burial, Okonkwo's gun explodes, killing Ezeudu's 16-year-old son. Having killed a fellow clansman, Okonkwo has no choice but to flee the clan with his family. Because the crime is a "female," or accidental, crime, they may return in seven years.

During their time in exile, Okonkwo and his family work hard to start a new farm in Okonkwo's motherland, Mbanta. His mother's kinsmen treat them kindly, but Okonkwo is extremely discouraged by the circumstances. He plans for the day he can return to his rightful place in Umuofia.

While he works in Mbanta, the white men begin to appear among neighboring clans, causing stories to spread about their power and destruction. When they finally arrive in Mbanta though, the clan is fascinated but finds their religion ridiculous. Nwoye, however, is captivated by the hymn he hears on the first day, and soon joins the Christians to get away from his father, who is outraged.

When Okonkwo finally returns to Umuofia, the white men have changed his clan as well. Mr. Brown, a white missionary who is popular for his patience and understanding approach, has built a school and hospital, and many clan members are enrolling their children in the school so that they can one day become clerks or teachers. However, soon after Okonkwo's return, Mr. Brown leaves the country due to health reasons, and Reverend Smith replaces him.

Reverend Smith is uncompromising, encouraging acts among the converted clan members that provoke the rest of the clan. When Enoch, a fanatical convert, rips the mask off of one of the clan's masked *egwugwu* during a ceremony, the clan retaliates by **burning** down the church. Reverend Smith reports this transgression, and the District Commissioner tricks the clan's leaders into meeting with him before handcuffing them. The clan leaders, including Okonkwo, suffer insults and beatings before they are released once the village pays the fine.

The morning after their release, the clan leaders speak of war before they are interrupted by the arrival of court messengers. Full of hate, Okonkwo confronts the leader, who says that the white man commands the meeting to stop. In a flash, Okonkwo strikes down the messenger with his machete. Seeing that none of his clansmen support him in his violent action, Okonkwo walks away and hangs himself.

When the District Commissioner comes to fetch Okonkwo the next day, the clansmen lead him to his hanging body instead, saying that they cannot touch it, since it's an abomination for a man to take his own life. The District Commissioner finds this custom interesting, making note of it for his book on Nigeria, which he plans to title *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.*

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Okonkwo – The novel's main character and an influential clan leader, Okonkwo fears becoming an unsuccessful, weak man like his father, Unoka. As a result, Okonkwo is hardworking and aggressive, traits that bring him fame and wealth at the beginning of the novel. This same fear also causes Okonkwo to be impatient and brash, however, leading to his eventual downfall when he can't adjust to the changes occurring in the clan.

Nwoye – Nwoye is Okonkwo's eldest son. Nwoye resembles his grandfather Unoka, in that he's drawn to gentleness and music, even though he recognizes that his father disapproves. This tension between Okonkwo and Nwoye leads to an eventual split when Nwoye becomes one of the clan members who leave the clan to join the Christians.

Ikemefuna – Ikemefuna is the ill-fated boy the Mbaino sacrifice to Umuofia in order to prevent war. Ikemefuna is unaware that his father had a hand in killing one of the daughters of Umuofia and doesn't understand why he's taken away from his mother and sister. He settles into Okonkwo's household for three years and comes to consider Okonkwo his true father. Nwoye looks up to Ikemefuna, and the two become inseparable. At the end of three years, the clan decides that the boy must be killed, and Okonkwo deals the killing blow.

Ogbuefi Ezeudo – Ezeudo is oldest man in the village and a great orator. He warns Okonkwo not to take part in the killing of Ikemefuna, but Okonkwo pays no heed. Ezeudo passes away shortly afterwards, and Okonkwo accidentally kills one of Ezeudo's sons when his gun splinters at Ezeudo's burial.

Okonkwo and his family are exiled for seven years.

Ekwefi – Ekwefi is Okonkwo's second wife and the mother of Ezinma. Once the village beauty, Ekwefi ran away from her first husband to live with Okonkwo. Ezinma is her only surviving child, and the two share a close relationship. Having lost her first nine children to death in infancy, Ekwefi fears that she will lose Ezinma too.

Ezinma – Ezinma is Okonkwo's eldest daughter and Ekwefi's only child to survive past infancy. Ezinma resembles her mother who was once the village beauty. She understands her father well, and he in turn wishes that she had been born a son. Ezinma also shares a close relationship with her mother, who considers Ezinma to be a companion as well as a daughter.

Mr. Brown – Mr. Brown, the first white missionary to travel to Umuofia, institutes a policy of respect and compromise between the church and the clansmen. He engages in long religious discussions with Akunna in order to understand the Igbo traditions, and he builds a school and a hospital in Umuofia. Unlike Reverend Smith who arrives later, Mr. Brown avoids resorting to violence and harsh methods of enforcing church beliefs, attempting to use his understanding of the Igbo faith to convert clansmen.

Reverend James Smith – Reverend Smith replaces Mr. Brown after the latter departs for health reasons. Unlike Mr. Brown, Reverend Smith is impatient and strict, showing no respect for indigenous customs or culture. He criticizes the way Mr. Brown interacted with the Umuofia people before his arrival, and he encourages extreme tactics to provoke change in the clan.

District Commissioner – The District Commissioner shows up in Umuofia after Okonkwo murders a white man towards the end of the novel. The District Commissioner plans to write a book on his experiences in Nigeria, and the title he chooses—*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*—reveals his superior attitude towards the Igbo people, whom he treats as objects of study rather than as actual people with their own complex customs and beliefs.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Unoka – Unoka is Okonkwo's father. Though a talented musician in life, he was also lazy and irresponsible, accumulating many debts. Unoka dies a shameful death, still in debt and without title. His death haunts Okonkwo, who vows to hate everything that his father loved, including gentleness and idleness.

Obierika – Obierika is Okonkwo's close friend. He questions clan tradition at times, choosing not to take part in the killing of Ikemefuna, for example, and wondering why Okonkwo's accidental crime should merit exile for seven years. He helps Okonkwo by selling his yams and visiting him in exile.

Akunna – Akunna, a respected man of the clan, discusses religious beliefs with Mr. Brown. During these discussions, Akunna brings up some striking similarities between their methods of worship.

Uchendu – Uchendu is the younger brother of Okonkwo's mother. Uchendu attempts to reassure Okonkwo after he arrives with his family in Mbanta, advising him to be grateful for the comfort his motherland offers.

Enoch – Enoch is a fanatical convert to the Christian church in Umuofia. While Mr. Brown disapproves of Enoch's blatant disrespect for Igbo traditions, Reverend Smith encourages Enoch's provocative behavior.

Chielo – Chielo is a widow who also serves as a priestess in Umuofia. She is dedicated to the Oracle of the goddess Agbala. Chielo is friends with Ekwefi and cares for Ezinma, whom she calls "my daughter."

Nwakibie – Nwakibie, a wealthy clansman, lends Okonkwo 800 **seed-yams** when Okonkwo is still young, helping him build the beginnings of his personal wealth and status. However, the year that Nwakibie lends Okonkwo the seed-yams turns out to be the worst year for harvest in living memory.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

TRADITION VS. CHANGE

The novel's title is a quote from a poem by the Irish poet W.B. Yeats called "The Second Coming": "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Much of the novel centers on Umuofia traditions of marriage, burial, and harvest. Achebe's decision to use a third-person narrator instead of writing the book from Okonkwo's perspective demonstrates just how central the idea of tradition is to the book, since the third-person narrator can more objectively describe facets of Umuofia society—their love of proverbs or how they make judicial decisions, for example—to the reader than Okonkwo could as an insider to these rituals. As the quote in the epigraph suggests, though, these traditions that form the center of Umuofia society cannot survive in the face of major changes occurring around them. As the white men enter the clans and impose their world order upon them, Umuofia society spirals apart.

Okonkwo and his son Nwoye also symbolize tradition and change, respectively. Okonkwo's character represents tradition, since he holds conventional ideas of rank, reputation,

and masculinity in high esteem. As the book progresses, however, Okonkwo begins to fall out of favor with the clans, and his descent signals the crumbling of traditional Umuofia society. His adherence to tradition also drives him to kill his own surrogate son, Ikemefuna, driving away Nwoye in the process. Nwoye feels cold when he contemplates certain aspects of Umuofia society—such as leaving infant twins out to die and the idea of sacrificing innocents like Ikemefuna—and this pushes him to join the Christians when he's given the chance later in the novel.

FATE VS. FREE WILL

From the start, Okonkwo's will seems to drive his ascent in Umuofia society. He rises from being the son of a debtor to being one of the leaders of the clan, thanks to his hard work and aggression. He becomes known for his wrestling prowess, and we are told that this cannot be attributed to luck: "At the most one could say that his *chi* or personal god was good. But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed."

However, once things start turning sour for Okonkwo, he begins to blame his fate. This begins with Ikemefuna's death. Ikemefuna, along with the infant twins of the novel, represent the most straightforward victims—they aren't given a chance to act, but are instead acted upon violently. ("The ill-fated lad was called Ikemefuna.") Okonkwo blames the Oracle for his part in murdering Ikemefuna, though it could be argued—and *is* argued by the clan's oldest member, Ezeudu, and by Okonkwo's neighbor Obierika—that he had a choice in whether to take part or not. Later, when Okonkwo's gun splinters and he accidentally kills one of Ezeudu's sons, Okonkwo faces exile. Although his crops do well in the neighboring clan and he is allowed to return in seven years, Okonkwo is completely discouraged by the experience, and we find a reversal of the earlier quote: "A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not true—that if a man said yea his *chi* also affirmed. Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation."

LANGUAGE

Language is a vital part of Umuofia society. Strong orators like Ogbuefi Ezeugo are celebrated and given honorable burials. Because clan meetings are so important for organization and decision-making, these speakers play an important role for society. Storytelling is also a form of education for the clan—whether they're masculine war stories or feminine fables, storytelling defines different roles for clan members and moves them to action. Even western religion takes hold because of story and song: when Nwoye first hears a hymn, it marks the beginning of his transition from clan member to Christian.

The white District Commissioner also notes the importance of language to the Umuofia, but in a less generous light. When speaking with Obierika, he thinks: "One of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words," suggesting both the white men's condescension towards the Umuofia and how white language and culture will come to overtake that of Umuofia. At the end of the novel, the District Commissioner mentions the title of the book he plans to write about his experiences in Nigeria: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. The District Commissioner's proposed title here is itself wordy and grandiose—i.e. superfluous. But what distinguishes it from the Umuofia language is that it's book-learned—and it will be written down. The ability to read and write in English begins to represent power, as the white men provide more financial incentives for learning their language and more clan members choose to enroll in their schools.

Achebe's decision to transcribe several words from the Igbo language throughout the novel takes back some of this power, however, by suggesting that there are African ideas that cannot be adequately described in English. Achebe also uses repetition and idioms to create a more African style while writing in English. To add to this, what colonial rule and education unwittingly gave Nigerians was a common language with which to communicate with one another—by writing in English, Achebe is telling a story that people across Nigeria can comprehend, and by shaping it to his purposes, Achebe is claiming what was originally imposed.

MASCULINITY

Okonkwo dedicates himself to being as masculine as possible, and through his rise to become a powerful man of his tribe and subsequent fall both within the tribe and in the eyes of his son Nwoye, the novel explores the idea of masculinity. Okonkwo believes in traditional gender roles, and it pains him that his son Nwoye is not more aggressive like he is. As a result, it's revealing that he expresses the wish that his daughter Ezinma were a boy—from this we know how fond he is of her. Additionally, in a meeting towards the very beginning of the book, Okonkwo insults a man without title by calling him a woman, demonstrating how much masculinity is valued when ranking those in Umuofia society. Ultimately, though, Okonkwo's adherence to masculinity and aggression leads to his fall in society—he becomes brittle and unable to bend with the changes taking place in his clan. In keeping with this principle of masculinity, Okonkwo forces himself to kill his own surrogate son, murder the white man against his better judgment, and hang himself before a punishment can be imposed by others. Okonkwo's aggression makes him weak in the end—it leaves him with no room to maneuver against the more subtle ways of the white man.

Nwoye struggles with this idea of masculinity, as he wants to please his father by being aggressive and traditional, but ultimately, he's repelled by the violence in Umuofia rituals and joins the Christians. Nwoye's departure can also be linked to this idea from Okonkwo's uncle, Uchendu, after the family is exiled from Umuofia: "'It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut.'" Likewise, after being beaten by his father, Nwoye leaves to seek solace in the more feminine and seemingly gentle Christian religion.

RELIGION

Religion is the main arena where both cultural differences and similarities play out at the end of the novel. Religion represents order in both societies, but they manifest differently. While religion in Umuofia society is based on agriculture, religion is seen as education in the white man's world. As a result, the gods in Umuofia society are more fearsome, since clan members are at the mercy of natural cycles for their livelihood. Mr. Brown, the white missionary, condemns this idea of fearing your god, but in fact the white man's religion takes root using fear tactics as well. When clan members break certain laws or displease the white men, they're locked up, starved, and beaten.

The dialogue between one of the clan leaders of a neighboring tribe, Akunna, and Mr. Brown reveals how much both systems of religion have in common. Akunna agrees, for example, that their wooden carvings of deities are just that—wooden carvings—but he likens it to the figure of Mr. Brown: he's also just a conduit or symbol for the western God. Akunna expresses what the narrator has already suggested—that the Umuofia people only pretend to believe in certain aspects of their religion, such as the masked gods who are really tribe members wearing masks. This dialogue about religion does a lot to carry out Achebe's mission of depicting Nigerian society as one that's far from primitive—depicting it instead as a culture with mythologies and rituals and an understanding of the mythologies behind those rituals. It's also one of the moments when more similarities than differences are stressed between the two cultures.

Religion also returns us to the Yeats poem quoted in the epigraph. The poem uses plenty of ominous Biblical language in describing an apocalyptic scenario, which parallels the situation in the novel where religion is the vehicle for the fall of Umuofia society. Western religion breaks order in the Umuofia society by taking in outcasts and clan members without title and giving them power. By taking power away from the clan's authorities, western religion destroys the clan's old methods of justice and order, creating an apocalyptic scenario for the clan's former way of life.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

YAMS

Towards the beginning of the novel, Achebe's narrator refers to yam as "the king of crops," emphasizing both its importance in Umuofia society and its masculine status. The clan's year is divided according to the planting and harvesting of yams, and Okonkwo's mood and actions vary whether it's the Week of Peace, the planting season, or the Feast of the New Yam. During the Feast of the New Yam, for example, Okonkwo grows restless with celebrations and the lack of work, and his temper flares, creating an episode of violence against Ekwefi. During the planting season, Okonkwo berates Ikemefuna and Nwoye for mishandling the seed-yams, but he's actually the most content during this period of labor, since he can work tirelessly. Yams are labor intensive and considered a man's crop. Only men plant yams, and their ability to support their family with their yam harvest is a sign of wealth and ability.

FIRE

Okonkwo and his fellow clansmen liken him to a "Roaring Flame"—aggressive, powerful, and strong-willed. For Okonkwo, these are all positive, masculine traits, and he laments the fact that his son Nwoye doesn't possess the same fiery spirit. However, Okonkwo has a revelation in Chapter 17, as he gazes into the fire after his son joins the Christians: "Living fire begets cold, impotent ash." He realizes that his aggression could foster the opposite in Nwoye, but he never makes the connection that fire eventually exhausts its source as well. All of Okonkwo's impatience and aggression eventually lead to his own destruction after a spectacular final flare of anger when he murders the white messenger.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Anchor Books edition of *Things Fall Apart* published in 1994.

"Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

When Okoye visits Unoka to collect a debt, he couches his request in an extensive set of proverbs. The narrator reflects, as a result, on the way local business is conducted indirectly, with a high value placed on the language that facilitates the deal.

Proverbs are one of the main structuring elements of this novel: They appear both in the interactions between characters and in the language of the narrator himself. Here, their importance is explicitly marked within the larger subset of the "art of conversation"—a phrase that renders minute interactions a matter of ritual and practice. Furthermore, a proverb—"the palm-oil with which words are eaten"—is used to describe the functioning of proverbs themselves. This meta-textual trick only further stresses the centrality of this stylistic device, and it also asserts that proverbs function as a kind of mitigation of what might otherwise be harsh or overly-direct statements.

The structural importance of proverbs is particularly important to note, because of how they operate differently from metaphorical or allegorical language the reader might expect in their place. Proverbs are similar to these devices because they use language or an image from another realm to reflect on an event, but they are tied to a specific shared cultural history—whereas metaphoric language tends to value originality and departure from shared history. Achebe thus fuses local artistic tradition with the form of the novel—which derives from European heritage—to fashion his own hybrid work.

❝ Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Here the narrator reflects on Okonkwo's rapid ascent in Ibo society. He stresses how personal prowess may grant someone a position above that normally permitted by his age.

This statement addresses a pre-conceived idea a reader might have about the Igbo society: that a constant hierarchy is maintained between elders and youth. Although that hierarchy is "respected," the fact that "achievement was revered" grants personal acts a relatively higher status—and the following proverb reasserts how differences in position may be transcended if certain rules are heeded. Thus Igbo culture is shown to be dynamic and merit-oriented, a society in which mobility is permitted and encouraged based on personal achievement.

One should also note, however, that the proverb itself is said by "elders," which seems to reinstate their relative power. That is to say, although their age is only respected and not revered—they are the ones selecting the exact proverbs and cultural norms that would allow someone like Okonkwo to gain power.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear. It was called a string.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

After Okonkwo hears a call summoning the men to the marketplace, the narrator observes the symbolic importance of darkness in Umuofia society. He stresses the fears its citizens feel in the night, particularly that of wild animals.

These lines help clarify the way Umuofia society conceives of both superstition and language. In the first case, a dark environment generates increased paranoia: The animals are not simply perceived to be more sinister, but they actually "became" so. (Notably, the narrator himself is shown to be a outside observer on this cultural association, while the Umuofia citizens are fully imbedded it in.) Similarly, those of Umuofia believe there to be an inherent link between the language they use and its effects on the spiritual functioning of the world. As when the narrator stressed the importance of proverbs, this line confirms the central role of language in Umuofia society. Indeed, it is believed to be capable of altering the course of actual events, such as causing a snake to hear—instead of just playing a communicative function.

> ...[Okonkwo] was not afraid of war. He was a man of action, a man of war. Unlike his father he could stand the look of blood. In Umuofia's latest war he was the first to bring home a human head.

Related Characters: Okonkwo, Unoka

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Okonkwo wonders about the nature of the town meeting, guessing, perhaps, that it will bring news of a war. These thoughts cause him to reflect on his recent successes, and to offer a brazen confidence in future battles.

This passage reiterates how Okonkwo is both brave and violent; his strength is impressive but also takes rash and aggressive forms. He first defines himself in terms of "action" and "war," indicating that these are the primary components of his identity. Next, he contrasts these features with those of his father, reiterating the way Okonkwo chooses assertive behaviors as a way to distance himself from his father's weakness. The reference to a "human head" both serves as an example of this military strength and adds a further piece of information about Umuofia society: warfare includes the taking of prizes and trophies to demonstrate one's military prowess.

Yet we should note that Okonkwo does not pause to consider other reasons a meeting would have been called—instead he immediately jumps to a violent conclusion. Although Okonkwo is indeed correct that the call signals conflict with another clan, his tendency to jump to aggressive conclusions foreshadows how his defaulting to violence will bring his downfall.

> And in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle – the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. And there were indeed occasions when the Oracle had forbidden Umuofia to wage a war. If the clan had disobeyed the Oracle they would surely have been beaten, because their dreaded *agadi-nwayi* would never fight what the Ibo call *a fight of blame*.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

As the people of Umuofia make their demands on Mbaino, the narrator observes how the decision of going to war is made. He explains that it rests on the resolution of the Oracles, and that their affirmation is necessary for a successful campaign.

These lines point to the complex and mediated system in Umuofia for deciding whether to engage in violence. The town does not act immediately, but rather must consult a spiritual authority—in addition to calling together the members of the town to offer their opinions. After establishing this process, the narrator is careful to offer examples of its efficacy—the moments when war was "forbidden." And finally, he observes the reason for their listening: they would lose the war, for it would be a "flight of blame" and thus one not based on honor or divine-sanctioned need. The term "agadi-nwayi" here means literally "old woman," but it symbolizes the "medicine" or magic power of each clan.

This final note on losing unsanctioned battles is an important clarification. It shows the Oracles not simply to be bureaucratic steps intended to slow down decision-making, but rather to be invested with actual prophetic and spiritual power. In this way, the narrator shows Umuofia to hold a compelling justification and decision-making process for their battles—and he also foreshadows the shock the characters will feel when the Oracles are incapable of predicting the actions of the white men.

> Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was *agbala*. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title. And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness.

Related Characters: Okonkwo, Unoka

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator describes the harsh way Okonkwo organizes his family, he makes repeated reference to the character's childhood. He claims that Okonkwo's actions today result from wishing to distance himself from a father

he perceived as weak.

Okonkwo's great aversion to weakness can, here, be pinpointed to a single memory, and indeed a similar word: agbala. Once more, the narrator stresses the importance of language within Umuofia society, for the label "agbala" to designate a feminine and untitled man is sufficient to structure Okonkwo's entire relationship to his father and to his own identity. That one word defines the "one passion" that controls Okonkwo, indicating that his personality is singularly driven—and thus corroborating the way he is remarkably strong but unable to deviate from this harsh singular viewpoint. He can see no need for "gentleness" or "idleness" in any setting whatsoever.

This passage implies that Okonkwo's strict personality is neither an inherent quality he was born with nor a reflection of Umuofia society, but rather a reaction to his father. It also gives a complicated image of gentleness in Umuofia society, and the narratorial distance from Okonkwo's perspective implies that his may not be the only pertinent viewpoint. Indeed, the text implies that Okonkwo's single-mindedness may have left him blind to the way that gentleness may indeed be an effective element of his household.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Unoka was an ill-fated man. He had a bad chi or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave, or rather to his death, for he had no grave. He died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess.

Related Characters: Unoka

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator continues to recount Unoka's backstory and his effect on Okonkwo's development. He observes that Unoka's failures were the result of a bad fate and personal god—both of which became visualizable in his death.

Whereas earlier descriptions of Unoka blame personality flaws for his failure, this passage attributes responsibility far more to destiny: in particular, "ill-fated" and "evil fortune" position blame on an external sources. Yet, the idea of "bad chi or personal god" is more ambiguous: the phrase implies that Unoka was born into his state, but it also equates that state directly with his personality, for the god is "personal." That is to say, Unoka cannot blame his actions on external and universal gods, but rather experiences ill will due to one more intimately tied with his identity. The passage thus leaves a level of ambiguity on where to position personal accountability within Umuofia society. Although much value is attributed to holding an excellent work ethic, here that ethic itself seems to come from destiny.

The role of destiny is highlighted by the importance placed on Unoka's cause of death. That he "died of the swelling" is naturally not a result of personal inadequacy, but rather an external curse. Yet it is also "an abomination to the earth goddess," as if Unoka himself had been in cahoots with the "personal god." Due to his cause of death, Unoka has to be buried in the Evil Forest instead of in a grave, which only verifies how separate he is from Umuofia society. Thus although the passage seems to absolve him of some guilt, it also reinstates the harsh social reaction—which extends even into his death.

❝ But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed.

Related Characters: Okonkwo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator offers this proverb to help contextualize why Okonkwo has been so successful. He confirms the importance of fate, but also notes that Okonkwo's personality has itself shaped fate.

These lines clarify the perceived role of destiny in Umuofia society. For while "chi" might seem to prescribe one's experiences, here it is revealed to be in a more dynamic relationship with the characters' identities. They can influence it by saying yes—that is to say by working hard, exhibiting motivation, and demanding personal success. Furthermore, the text reiterates why Okonkwo's prowess is met with acclaim by the society—because it reveals both a good chi and a personality that has said "yes very strongly." Thus the text seeks to, if not resolve, as least mediate between accounts of fate and of personal success, by stressing how the two intertwine in one's chi.

Okonkwo did as the priest said. He also took with him a pot of palm-wine. Inwardly, he was repentant. But he was not the man to go about telling his neighbors that he was in error. And so people said he had no respect for the gods of the clan.

Related Characters: Okonkwo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

After Okonkwo beats his wife during the Week of Peace, he repents before the priest of Ani. Yet his pride prevents him from showing this repentance publicly, which earns him a level of social admonishment.

This moment demonstrates the importance in Umuofia society of external performance: although Okonkwo is repentant "inwardly," his response is deemed unacceptable because it does include a corresponding act for "his neighbors." Thus religion is presented as a both private and public act—and remorse becomes something that must be externalized for the entire society.

We see here, too, a notable shift in the society's image of Okonkwo. Whereas before he has been presented in generally complimentary terms, here we have a clear instance where his personality has left him out of step with social norms: first, his insistence on aggression and rigidity prevents him from observing the Week of Peace, for he is unable to recalibrate his actions based on the circumstance. And second, his wish to remain ever-strong in front of his neighbors similarly causes them to misinterpret him as having "no respect for the gods of the clan." Thus Okonkwo's personal prowess may make him the epitome of certain Umuofia masculine values, but it also brings him into conflict with other spiritual and social norms.

Chapter 7 Quotes

Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell...

Related Characters: Nwoye

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Although Nwoye has begun to take on more masculine tasks in Okonkwo's household, he still retains a preference for the more stereotypically "feminine" pursuits.

This passage corroborates the strict divide between masculine and feminine in Umuofia society: certain chores and behaviors are deemed one or the other, and various characters are categorized according to which actions they perform. It is notable that biological sex does not necessarily correlate to the gender of the tasks that one prefers: Nwoye is a boy, but his preference for "the stories that his mother used to tell" reveals a feminine tendency that Okonkwo hates.

We should not forget, however, that the labeling of storytelling as feminine occurs in a novel—and indeed in a novel that constantly prizes proverbs and the way that Umuofia citizens (men and women alike) place a high value on language. Thus the reader should be cautious not to take the supposedly feminine quality of storytelling as negative, or even inappropriate for Nwoye. Indeed, the lasting power of the novel to have encapsulated the tale of Okonkwo indicates that storytelling has a longevity that will outlast the temporary masculine exertion of force.

And at last the locusts did descend. They settled on every tree and on every blade of grass; they settled on the roofs and covered the bare ground. Mighty tree branches broke away under them, and the whole country became the brown-earth color of the vast, hungry swarm.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

The arrival of the locusts brings a source of welcome food, but also a nuanced omen for Umuofia society.

It is important to differentiate between the meaning of the locusts in Achebe's text and the symbolism many readers might expect: though locusts in a Judeo-Christian context are a plague and an indication that a society has sinned, here they are welcomed as nourishment. Although their presence may be oppressive, they are not taken as the same negative omen as one might expect. That symbolic distance is particularly notable considering the way Christianity will later enter into the novel through the missionaries: here Umuofia exists independently of the missionaries and thus has not included the Christian meaning of locusts into its symbolic system.

Instead, the narrator points out an identification of the culture with the locusts—"the whole country" changes color and the physical environment is "covered" entirely by them. The repetition of "every" in "every tree" and "every blade of grass" only serves to reiterate this universality. They thus represent a widespread shift in society, foreshadowing a significant event, which will come to be the decision, at last, to kill Ikemefuna.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Ezinma took the dish in one hand and the empty water bowl in the other and went back to her mother's hut. "She should have been a boy," Okonkwo said to himself again. His mind went back to Ikemefuna and he shivered.

Related Characters: Ikemefuna, Ezinma, Okonkwo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Enzima gives Okonkwo a dish of plantains to break his fast, and she assertively commands him to finish them. Their exchange makes Okonkwo ruminate on her masculine qualities.

This passage further clarifies the gender roles in Umuofia society. Once more, the text divorces the sex of a character from the type of action he or she performs. It is possible for Enzima, for instance, to take on stereotypical masculine characteristics by being assertive with Okonkwo. This behavior earns her respect, for Okonkwo both follows the command and then praises her for making it. Yet when Okonkwo adds that "she should have been a boy," the tone of the text changes: the masculine behaviors may be desirable, but they only make Okonkwo wish that they were housed in a male body as well. Thus even as the narrative breaks down some of the gender binaries at play, it also reaffirms them. Ultimately, at least for Okonkwo, the gender of actions and the sex of the character should conform to each other.

❝ "The world is large," said Okonkwo. "I have even heard that in some tribes a man's children belong to his wife and her family."
"That cannot be," said Machi. "You might as well say that the woman lies on top of the man when they are making the children."

Related Characters: Okonkwo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

During the bride-price negotiation for Obierika's daughter, a conversation begins on similar practices in other cultures. The characters recount a variety of customs and struggle to reconcile how other societies could behave so differently from their own.

This exchange focuses specifically on gender roles as they manifest differently across cultures. As an example of the broad range of customs, Okonkwo describes a more matriarchal one. This comparison causes Machi to respond with shock, and to compare familial ownership to sexual positions. Both characters find such dynamics unbelievable, even appalling, for they would attribute more social power to woman. Thus the passage serves first and foremost to reaffirm the highly patriarchal nature of Umuofia society: Machi is so set in his ways that he considers bedroom politics that are quite common in other places to be entirely outlandish.

More broadly, this exchange shows the simultaneous attempt and difficulty for Umuofia members to make sense of other cultures. Although the bride-price bit provokes a useful comparative reflection, it also stresses the narrowness of these characters' perspectives. Achebe thus stresses the relative difficulty of accepting cultural practices that lie outside one's familial experience and subtly hints at the importance of being able to negotiate with other norms.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years…

Related Characters: Okonkwo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator describes the social impact and symbolic significance of how Okonkwo accidentally kills Ezeudu's

son, and clarifies the necessary punishment in terms of the gendered nature of the act.

As before, Okonkwo performs an act that is "a crime against the earth goddess," only here the punishment is far harsher than personal repentance. The distanced language of the phrase "a man who committed it" highlights how the punishment is not tied specifically to Okonkwo's identity, but is rather an application of a universal law to his specific case. Next, the narrator delineates between male and female crimes: Since Okonkwo killed Ezeudu's son by accident, his act is deemed "female," but the murder is also presumably "male" due to its violent nature.

That Okonkwo has committed an act representative of both genders is quite revealing: if before, his character had been fully and overly identified with masculine acts, instead here we see the influx of the very thing he most fears: femininity. Yet the female crime is not the result of weakness, but rather the way that Okonkwo's obsession with violence and strength has caused him to act rashly. Beyond reasserting the way every act is coded based on gender in Umuofia society, this passage indicates that Okonkwo is far from immune to female qualities.

❝ As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezeudu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts again Okonkwo. His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman.

Related Characters: Okonkwo, Obierika

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 124-125

Explanation and Analysis

After Okonkwo and his family depart Umuofia, this group of men destroy his household. Their actions are described as neither malicious nor particularly voluntary, but rather as the necessary result of fate.

This language stresses how the citizens of Umuofia often do not identify their acts as individual choices motivated by emotions, but rather as the result of a divine system of justice. Describing them simply as "a large crowd of men" and repeatedly as "They" reiterates this dehumanizing bit—except for Obierika, who stands for a source of independent and questioning thought on the culture's traditions. That these men "were merely [the earth goddess'] messengers" corroborates how characters often play two roles: individual actors in society, and supernatural agents organized by a higher power.

As a result, they can retain an emotional distance from the act, continuing to hold "no hatred" for Okonkwo. The trivializing language—"merely cleansing"—only serves to reiterate how inconsequential the action seems. Although previous passages have valued the role of individual agency in Umuofia society, this one reverts power back to fate, as a social organizer that enacts justice without personal implication.

❝ Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer.

Related Characters: Obierika (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

As the Umuofia mob destroys Okonkwo's compound, Obierika questions their actions. He wonders whether their society should really punish accidental behavior.

Obierika is presented again as a critical eye on the functioning of Umuofia society. As opposed to the other characters, who obey traditions directly and assume they are inflexible, Obierika wonders whether the rules might not be modified to be more just. He thus embodies an important nuance in Umuofia: its ability to self-assess and potentially change. Though it would be easy to interpret the society as rigid and unchanging, Obierika is proof that the people of Umuofia can cultivate the independent thought necessary to alter its traditions.

Despite this potential for revision, however, Obierika's thoughts are generally presented as hopeless musings rather than affirmative shifts. His rhetorical question gives him "no answer," and while this lack of closure may signal his independence, it also reiterates his relatively passive position. Okonkwo's punishment, nonetheless, serves as an opening for both reader and narrator to examine the state

of Umuofia and to test the limits of its cultural norms.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not true—that if a man said yea his *chi* also affirmed. Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation.

Related Characters: Okonkwo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

As Okonkwo begins his new life in Mbanta, he reflects on his disheartened and disenfranchised existence. Denying the active role than men have in their fate, he now considers "chi" to be an independent force ordaining one's life.

This line turns an earlier proverb on its head: whereas before Okonkwo's character was used as an example of someone who had said yes to his chi and therefore experienced corresponding positive effects, here he becomes the counterexample of that same saying. This passage shifts control to the power of destiny over individual agency, claiming that men and chi are not in a dynamic relationship—but rather that chi is capable of ignoring men's affirmations.

To deny such a proverb is radical and somewhat blasphemous, in particular considering the high stakes of language and of the "elders" from which this "saying" comes. Thus Okonkwo seems to renounce not only his previous work ethic but also some key tenants of the society from which he hails. Indeed, this aligns closely with his earlier ambivalent relationship to language, in which Okonkwo often saw it as superficial or empty. Yet these lines mark a more complete renunciation of its expressive power.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ "...I forgot to tell you another thing which the Oracle said. It said that other white men were on their way. They were locusts, it said, and that first man was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain. And so they killed him."

Related Characters: Obierika (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

When Okonkwo visits Obierika, he tells of how the clan of Abame was destroyed by white men. The Oracle, he explains, predicted their arrival, and the clan interpreted the warning as a sign to kill the first white man.

In recounting the story, Okonkwo poses a complex question about the fate of the Abame clan. Ironically, it was in following their Oracle's orders that the men brought about their destruction—but it remains unclear what this implies. Either they they misinterpreted the Oracle, acted according to fate, or followed mistaken advice from the Oracle. In the first case, we could say that the men reacted overly violently to what was only a warning; in the second, the Oracle's comment on "harbinger" and "locusts" implied that the men could not be stopped, no matter what; in the third, the entire spiritual system would seem fated for collapse. In a sense all three are true, as will play out in the coming chapters.

The passage also reverses the symbolism of the locusts from before: whereas in both cases, the bugs represent a force that covers the land, here they are a pest that overpowers the people of Umuofia—whereas before they were subservient and served as a food source. Thus the white men represent not only an existential threat, but also a radical change to the symbolic and spiritual structures of Umuofia society.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ He told them that the true God lived on high and that all men when they died went before Him for judgment. Evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm-oil. But good men who worshipped the true God lived forever in His happy kingdom.

Related Characters: Mr. Brown

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

When Obierika visits Okonkwo, he witnesses the arrival of missionaries in Umuofia. He focuses, here, on the tenants of

the Christian religion that have been evangelized in Igbo society.

This description of Christianity shows how cultural and religious norms will be interpreted differently as they manifest in different societies. For instance, consider how Obierika uses the proverb "burned like palm-oil" to translate the Christian concept of Hell into symbolism that functions in Igbo society. Similarly, the tenets of Christianity are rephrased so that they juxtapose directly with Igbo beliefs. That "God lived on high" contrasts directly with the Igbo Earth goddess who lives among the Umuofia people, and the Christian divine justice system similarly conflicts with the way law is meted out in Umuofia.

Instead of a set of oracles and society members who enact the will of the gods, Christianity holds only a single divine judgement that separates evil from good. Here we can see the glimmers of the ideological conflicts between the two: Christian missionaries will assert a single divine authority that directly opposes the social and polytheistic model embraced by Umuofia. Furthermore, by defamiliarizing these components of Christian doctrine, Achebe gives us a sense of how both missionaries and indigenous cultures would have perceived each other: as confusing and heretical.

> But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him...It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul – the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed.

Related Characters: Nwoye, Okonkwo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

As Obierika continues to recount the arrival of the missionaries, he notes that Nwoye has been brought into their fold. Nwoye is, we learn, fascinated by the aesthetics of Christianity, as well as by the way their doctrine may resolve his own spiritual doubts.

A sharp differentiation occurs here between the spiritual beliefs of Christianity and the religion's artistic creations: the first is deemed "the mad logic of the Trinity," for it seems inherently self-contradictory, and directly conflicts with Igbo beliefs. Yet the second is "the poetry of the new religion" and "the hymn": both neutral or positive terms. They highlight a universal artistic quality that can cross different systems of cultural belief. Achebe thus stresses how it is this more aesthetic material brought by the missionaries that aids them in their evangelizing endeavors, more than simple dogma or preaching.

Yet Nwoye also shows an attraction to some actual facets of Christian belief. That the religion offers an "answer" to the "question that haunted his young soul" indicates that it brings a quality Nwoye has found lacking in Ibo society: Specifically, it gives a model in which the abandoned twins would be treated with compassion instead of neglect. Achebe thus presents the missionaries' beliefs as attractive to locals because they gave those who felt out-of-step or at-odds with certain practices an alternative framework with which to make sense of the world.

> Living fire begets cold, impotent ash.

Related Characters: Okonkwo (speaker), Nwoye

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

Okonkwo thinks of this phrase as he reflects on the way Nwoye has converted to Christianity. Its image encapsulates how Okonkwo's potent, ardent personality could give rise to a son deemed extremely weak.

This line marks a turning point in the text because it is the first instance of Okonkwo using metaphorical language—indeed, he seems to have invented his own proverb—indicating a source of genuine linguistic creativity. One might thus interpret this line as an indication that Okonkwo has embraced the softer, "feminine" characteristics associated with storytelling and language—yet the phrase itself implies just the opposite. Rather, it reinstates the hierarchy between Okonkwo's masculine personality as "living fire" versus the weak, feminine Nwoye, who is "cold, impotent ash." Though Okonkwo may have finally engaged in the game of imagistic language valued throughout the text, the way he does so only reaffirms his harsh and divisive views on the world.

Chapter 19 Quotes

"But I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship…And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. I fear for you; I fear for the clan."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

One of Okonkwo's kinsmen gives this speech during the feast thrown as they depart Mbanta. He acknowledges the importance of holding fast to rituals, particularly given the current presence of the Christian missionaries.

This passage shows both the importance of tradition in Mbanta society and the significant threat posed by the arrival of the white men. Although the reflection may be prompted by how well Okonkwo has observed traditional practices, its very articulation in the ritual points to a pervasive anxiety about the "abominable religion." Thus even when Christianity is not directly present in the text, it holds a ghostly cultural power due to the fear it has provoked.

More specifically, the kinsman is apprehensive about the way traditions and practices have radically shifted in such recent times. Though earlier in the text, Umuofia was presented as holding the capacity to slowly alter its cultural beliefs, Christianity has clearly caused radical and fast-paced ruptures with old practices: familial abandonment and rejection are now commonplace, and the narrator stresses the cannibalistic and self-harming nature of these practices. Thus Christianity is presented as an affront to Ibo society not only for the way it has induced a revision of various cultural practices, but specifically because the new practices have divided the society.

"The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has a put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart."

Related Characters: Okonkwo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

When Okonkwo returns to Umuofia, he broods with Obierika over the increasing presence of the white men. Their power, he claims, comes from the way they have fractured Umuofia and thus prevented the clan from mounting any genuine resistance.

Whereas earlier descriptions of the white men cast them as irrational and silly, Okonkwo here displays a level of respect: he notes they are "very clever" and interprets their actions not as weak but rather as a clever form of subterfuge through a false "foolishness." This observation is surprising considering how Okonkwo always prioritizes brute strength—and it indicates a character development in that he is learning to value other types of power.

More specifically, the white men's power originates from division: for instance how they have separated the Ibo Christian converts from those who respect Umuofia tradition—dividing Nwoye and Okonkwo himself. Variations on the phrase "put a knife on" reappear often throughout the novel's closing chapters, thus stressing how subtly undermining the local culture can be its own form of violence. Thus Achebe highlights how colonialism's strength came in many ways, not just from explicit force, but rather in subtle manipulation of local cultures that prevented them from forming a unified front.

Chapter 22 Quotes

One of the greatest crimes a man could commit was to unmask an *egwugwu* in public, or to say or do anything which might reduce its immortal prestige in the eyes of the uninitiated. And this was what Enoch did.

Related Characters: Enoch

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

Under the inflammatory guidance of Reverend Smith, Enoch harshly violates Ibo religious norms. As an act of defiance, he removes the mask of an egwugwu—an act which will at last incite a retaliation against the white men.

That the unmasking of an egwugwu marks the greatest violation to Ibo religion deserves a bit of consideration:

burning down a church might seem to be a far more aggressive act, but evidently they are held to be of equal significance. Why? Recall that both Ibo justice and spiritual systems are based on the ability for citizens to play two roles: they must at the same time be individual agents in society and de-personalized representations of larger social forces. By unmasking the egwugwu, Enoch destroys this careful calibration—equating the normal man with the incarnation of the divine. "The immortal prestige" vanishes, to be replaced by a simple human face.

His act, then, serves to demystify the entire religion and deprive it of its social power. Achebe stresses the social stakes of how a spiritual system presents itself to the "uninitiated." The power of a religion, he implies, comes from not only from its aesthetics and credos, but also from the way it maintains a sense of mystery from the broad population. To have stolen that from Umuofia is the greatest sin Enoch could commit.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ One of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words, he thought.

Related Characters: District Commissioner (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

When the District Commissioner speaks to Obierika about Okonkwo's hiding location, he becomes frustrated at the clan's ways of eluding direct questions. This annoyance leads to a general criticism on their love of proverbs.

Achebe encapsulates here the deep sense of cultural misunderstanding that has emerged between the white men and Ibo people. Describing proverbs as "superfluous words" entirely misses the series of complex social ceremonies that center around language—and reduces these practices to a set of unnecessary delays. To call into question the very nature of communication is to radically misunderstand the Ibo.

This preference for actions over words is also somewhat ironically in accord with Okonkwo's beliefs. In a sense, both Okonkwo and the District Commissioner hold a preference for aggression that is simultaneously effective and narrow-minded. Both value straightforward communication in a way that alienates them from others, and both implicitly deny the efficacy of a novel as a form itself—for *Things Fall Apart* is itself full of proverbs, metaphors, and other language that would be deemed "superfluous words" by the Commissioner. Achebe's text itself thus becomes an affront to the white men and a way for the Ibo linguistic culture to live on.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

At just eighteen, Okonkwo wins fame as the strongest wrestler in nine villages and beyond, throwing Amalinze the Cat, who for seven years had been unbeaten. Okonkwo's fame continues to grow over the next decades as he takes several wives and has children, but he lacks patience and is easily provoked into aggression, using his fists when he can't get his words out quickly enough. He also quickly grows impatient with unsuccessful men like his father.

Okonkwo's strength, aggressiveness, and strong will help him find success as a young man. Yet the flipside of that strength are more negative traits such as impatience and hotheadedness, suggesting that strength might not be as universally positive as Okonkwo seems to believe.

Okonkwo's father, Unoka, died ten years earlier. He was known for being lazy and irresponsible, owing all his neighbors money. Unoka loved music, playing the flute with the village musicians after harvest. He lived a carefree life as a young man, visiting different markets to play music and feast. However, as a grown man, Unoka was considered a failure, and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. Even though people laughed at him and swore never to lend him more money, Unoka always succeeded in borrowing more and piling up his debts.

Okonkwo is explicitly contrasted to his father, suggesting that Okonkwo's strength is an effort to redeem himself from his father's legacy. Unoka lacked a strong will and neglected his masculine responsibilities, such as taking care of family or trying to amass power or respect. Instead, Unoka loved music, which Okonkwo probably considers a more feminine pursuit.

The narrator tells us of a day when Unoka's neighbor Okoye comes to visit, bringing his goatskin to sit on, and Unoka takes out a kola nut for his guest. Unoka and Okoye argue about who should break the kola nut, and then speak for some time about health, harvest, and war. The last subject makes Unoka uncomfortable because he dislikes war, and so he changes the subject to music. Finally, Okoye comes to the point of his visit—he wants to collect Unoka's debt of 200 cowries. Okoye approaches the subject in lengthy proverbs, which the narrator describes as "the palm-oil with which words are eaten," and when Unoka finally understands what Okoye wants, he bursts out laughing. Unoka points to chalk lines on his wall that represent his debts and settles the matter by saying that he will pay his big debts first. Okoye rolls up his goatskin and leaves.

Unoka and Okoye's meeting demonstrates several traditions of Umuofia society here. They both remain polite by arguing that the other should break the kola nut. Once the nut is broken, they speak at length instead of getting to the point of the visit, using proverbs instead of talking bluntly. Unoka also demonstrates again how he disdains masculine topics like war in favor of more feminine subjects like music. Unoka also shows how he evades paying back his debts and even succeeds in borrowing more by saying that he will pay back larger debts first.

When Unoka died, he had no titles and was still heavily in debt. Okonkwo is very ashamed of his father, but wins fame for himself as the greatest wrestler in nine villages and as a wealthy farmer with three wives, two barns full of **yams**, and two titles. Although still young, Okonkwo is already one of the greatest men of his time. As a result, he comes to look after Ikemefuna, the doomed boy who is later sacrificed to the village of Umuofia by their neighbors in order to avoid war.

Okonkwo's strength and determination stem from the shame he feels towards his father—giving that strength a hint of brittleness, which we see when Okonkwo fails to protect Ikemefuna from his doom just as Unoka failed to protect Okonkwo as a boy. The narration also takes on a cyclical structure that recalls the oral traditions of the Igbo language, repeating the facts of Unoka's death and Ikemefuna's arrival.

CHAPTER 2

Okonkwo is just settling into bed one night when he hears the *ogene* of the town crier, who summons all the men of Umuofia to the marketplace the next morning. Okonkwo hears an overtone of tragedy in the crier's voice and wonders what might be amiss.

The clan traditionally relies on a town crier to spread news and gather clan members for meetings, demonstrating the importance of speech in Umuofia society.

The narrator describes how quiet and dark the night is without moonlight. Children avoid whistling so as not to call evil spirits, dangerous animals become even more dangerous in the dark, and snakes are not referred to by their real names in case they hear. Okonkwo tries to figure out what the meeting might be about, and thinks that there might be war with a neighboring clan. He remembers his own prowess in war, being the first to bring home a human head in the last war—his fifth head.

The narrator describes more traditions of Umuofia society, including fear of the dark. Again, the importance of language is emphasized, as the clan believes one can summon a snake just by speaking its name. Okonkwo reveals more of his aggressiveness, which has brought him success in the traditional masculine arena of war.

In the morning, the market place is full. Ogbuefi Ezeugo bellows "Umuofia kwenu" four times to get the clan's attention and silence the talk. He bellows the words a fifth time before pointing in the direction of Mbaino and describing how the sons of Mbaino have dared to murder a daughter of Umuofia—the wife of Ogbuefi Udo. The crowd then begins to shout in anger. In the end, it's decided that Mbaino will either choose war or offer a young man and a virgin as compensation for their crime.

In the morning, the town's best speaker gets everyone's attention with a traditional cry and dramatically reveals the Mbaino's crime, inspiring clan members to anger. His speech shows how language moves the clan to action, and we also get a glimpse of how their justice system works. The clan collectively decides what a fair punishment will be.

Umuofia's neighbors fear it as a powerful clan and try to avoid going to war with the Umuofia. The Umuofia, for their part, only go to war when their Oracle accepts it. When Okonkwo arrives at Mbaino as the emissary of war, he is treated with respect, returning two days later to Umuofia with a 15-year-old boy and a virgin. The boy's name is Ikemefuna, and the narrator reveals that Ikemefuna's sad story will continue to be told in Umuofia until the narrator's present day.

The Umuofia have great respect for their Oracle, who often holds religious power in their decision-making. Okonkwo's power is once again made evident by the respect shown to him by the Mbaino. The narrator also emphasizes again how ill-fated Ikemefuna is by foreshadowing his doom.

The elders, or *ndichie*, meet and decide that the girl should go to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered wife. As for the boy, the clan decides that Okonkwo will look after him until the elders decide his fate. For the next three years, Ikemefuna lives in Okonkwo's household.

Ikemefuna's fate here is decided by others—the elders, in this case. Okonkwo, with all his strength, becomes Ikemefuna's protector.

Okonkwo rules his household with a heavy hand and short temper, instilling fear in his wives and children. The narrator suggests that this might not indicate that Okonkwo is a cruel man at heart, but Okonkwo's whole life is dominated by the fear of failure and of weakness. Okonkwo still remembers a time when a playmate told him that his father was *agbala*, and Okonkwo came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, but also the name for a man with no titles. Since then, Okonkwo vowed to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved, including gentleness and idleness.

The story of "Agbala" reveals how masculinity and rank are tied together in traditional Umuofia, as well as the origin of Okonkwo's obsession with strength—the shame he felt when his playmate mocked his father's failure as feminine. But in devoting himself to strength for these reasons, strength becomes *a sort of weakness: if Okonkwo's shows strength because he fears failure, then it will make him rigid, as he will always have to act in ways that make him look strong even if such behavior leads to bad outcomes.*

During planting season, Okonkwo works long daily hours on his farm and rarely feels fatigue. His wives and young children suffer, however, and are afraid to complain openly. Okonkwo's first son, Nwoye, is twelve years old and already worries Okonkwo with his laziness, which Okonkwo seeks to correct with nagging and beating.

Nwoye doesn't embrace the traditional Umuofia values of aggression and masculinity the way Okonkwo wants him to, and Okonkwo begins to sow the seeds for Nwoye's resentment later in the book by beating and nagging him.

Okonkwo's wealth is clearly visible in his household. He has his own hut, or *obi*, and behind the *obi*, each of his three wives has a hut. He also owns a barn with long stacks of **yam** standing inside, a shed for goats, and a "medicine house" or shrine where he keeps the wooden symbols of his personal god and ancestral spirits.

Okonkwo has claimed that his fortune—which is considerable—comes from hard work, not luck. But it's worth noting that he devotes an entire shrine to his personal god and ancestral spirits.

When Ikemefuna joins Okonkwo's household, Okonkwo hands him over to his most senior wife, who asks if he'll be staying long. Okonkwo, who doesn't have an answer, tells her to do as she's told, so she takes him in with no further questions. Ikemefuna, still unaware that his father had a hand in killing one of the daughters of Umuofia, is terribly afraid and doesn't understand what's going on. He only knows that he's been taken away from his mother and that he traveled to Umuofia with another girl, who he never sees again.

Okonkwo's interaction with his wife demonstrates his power in the relationship. He's flabbergasted that she, as a woman and his wife, even questions him at all. Ikemefuna is described as being truly weak, truly alone. He is someone who needs a protector, which the strong Okonkwo seems like a good candidate to be. Yet the narrator foreshadows Ikemefuna's doom—and that Okonkwo won't ultimately protect the boy—by mentioning with finality that Ikemefuna never sees the girl from his village again.

CHAPTER 3

Okonkwo did not inherit a barn from his father, since Unoka had no barn to pass on. There is a story in Umuofia of how Unoka went to consult the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves to find out why he always had a miserable harvest. As Unoka began to describe the situation to the priestess, she interrupted to tell him that he had offended neither the gods nor his fathers, but that he was known for being lazy and weak. "Go home and work like a man," she concluded.

Okonkwo made his fortune himself, with no help from his father. The story describes how Unoka did the opposite, relying on outside help before being rebuffed and told to work and do his masculine duty. The Oracle's response to Unoka shows how mystical aspects of Umuofia religion support practical societal customs and beliefs.

Unoka is described as an ill-fated man with a bad chi or personal god. He died of swelling in his stomach and limbs, which is an abomination to the earth goddess and prevented him from having a proper burial. He was instead carried to the Evil Forest and left to die. When they carried him away, he brought his flute with him.

Despite Unoka's laziness, his sad end is still attributed to his personal god. When he dies, he carries his flute with him—an object he loves, but also a symbol of his failings in life.

Okonkwo did not inherit a barn, title, or wife from his father, but in spite of these disadvantages, he began to sow the seeds for a successful future even during his father's lifetime. He threw himself into work, out of fear of his father's pitiful life and shameful death.

Okonkwo wills himself to work hard and become successful. He throws himself into manly duties of labor.

Okonkwo worked to earn his first **seed-yams** with Nwakibie, a wealthy man in his village. Okonkwo brought him a kola nut and waited until the meal and small talk were finished before asking for some yams to sow. Nwakibie granted him 800 yams, a more generous offer than Okonkwo had thought he would receive, and Okonkwo left feeling happy. With his meager harvest, he hoped to feed his mother, two sisters, and father, as well as himself.

Okonkwo demonstrates his strong will and initiative by asking Nwakibie for seed-yams to sow. He follows tradition, bringing a kola nut and waiting until the end of the meal to make his request. His strength inspires others, and results in Nwakibie giving him more sees than he asks for.

The year Okonkwo took the **seed-yams** from Nwakibie turned out to be the worst year for harvesting in living memory. Flooding and drought killed most of his yams, despite Okonkwo's best efforts. One man hanged himself because of the year's terrible harvest. Okonkwo later says that since he survived that awful year, he'll survive anything.

Despite Okonkwo's hard work, he can't predict the weather, and he runs into very bad luck. Okonkwo attributes his survival of that year to his own strong will, but in doing so he does not learn the lesson that even great strength, will, and hard work are not always enough to withstand greater forces of fate or luck such as the whims of nature.

CHAPTER 4

People are struck by Okonkwo's roughness in dealing with less successful men. An old man uses the following proverb to describe him: "Looking at a king's mouth, one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast." A week earlier, a man with no titles contradicted Okonkwo at a meeting, and Okonkwo responded that the meeting was for men. Everyone took sides with the other man, and Okonkwo apologized before the meeting continued.

Okonkwo's insult echoes the childhood insult of "agbala" directed at his father, showing how much that wound still stings. Yet from their response it is clear that his fellow clansmen do not share Okonkwo's absolute attitude towards less successful men. The old man's proverb also emphasizes the importance of language—which Okonkwo struggles to use.

Okonkwo struggled against poverty and misfortune, earning success at an early age as the greatest wrestler in the land. The narrator asserts that this wasn't luck. At most, one could say that Okonkwo's personal god or *chi* was good, but the Ibo proverb says that "when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also." The clan chooses Okonkwo to carry a message of war to the Mbaino unless they agree to give up a young man and a virgin to make up for the murder of Udo's wife.

The proverb about chi is akin to the American saying "fate favors the bold," implying that a person can make their own fate by being aggressive. And this seems to be the case for Okonkwo, who earned his fame by working and struggling from poverty. The clan chooses him to carry the message of war based on his strength. Here we also see an example of Umuofia's response to an inter-clan transgression.

The virgin is given to Udo as a wife, and Ikemefuna is placed in Okonkwo's care until the clan can decide what to do with him, which ends up taking three years. Ikemefuna is afraid at first, even though Nwoye's mother treats him kindly. When Okonkwo hears that Ikemefuna is refusing to eat, he stands over Ikemefuna with a big stick while he eats. Ikemefuna becomes sick for three weeks, but when he recovers, he's no longer afraid or sad.

Ikemefuna is again the perfect example of a character who lacks *free will. Also note that the girl from Mbaino is given to Udo without dispute and considered a full replacement for his murdered wife, giving us a glimpse into Umuofia gender roles and the bias in favor of masculinity. The women are treated as interchangeable.*

Ikemefuna becomes popular in the household, and he grows very close with Nwoye in particular. Even Okonkwo grows fond of Ikemefuna, though he refuses to show it, since he believes that showing affection is a sign of weakness. However, he lets Ikemefuna accompany him to big village meetings or ancestral feasts, and Ikemefuna calls him father.

Okonkwo's idea of masculine strength prevents him from showing affection towards Ikemefuna, even though he allows Ikemefuna to take his son's place in accompanying him to events.

Ikemefuna came to the household only a few days before the Week of Peace, during which no work is done and no violence is tolerated in anticipation of the planting season. However, Okonkwo is provoked when his youngest wife goes to a friend's house and doesn't return in time to cook the afternoon meal. He beats her heavily when she returns, breaking the peace of the sacred week. The priest of the earth goddess, Ani, berates him and commands that he bring sacrifices to Ani's shrine to repent. Okonkwo does so and feels apologetic; however, he doesn't tell his neighbors this, and they conclude that he doesn't respect the gods of the clan. Everyone gossips about the transgression over the week.

Religion and nature are closely linked for the Igbo, since their survival depends on the land for harvest—the earth goddess is therefore very important. When Okonkwo angers her, he does feel sorry—but his ideal of manliness prevents him from saying so, and his lack of language makes him appear disrespectful to his neighbors. The fact that everyone gossips about the transgression shows how major it is—and how carried away Okonkwo gets with his anger and desire to look strong, even when it would be better to hold back.

After the Week of Peace, Okonkwo begins preparing his **seed-yams** for planting. Nwoye and Ikemefuna help by counting, and occasionally Okonkwo allows them to prepare a few yams each. However, he always finds fault in their efforts and berates them, even though he knows they're too young to fully grasp the art of preparing seed-yams. Still, because yams are a measure of manliness and ability, Okonkwo wants his son to start early.

Okonkwo wants to help his son by giving him skills his own father didn't give him, but his method is harsh, alienating his son instead. Also, Okonkwo has fully accepted Ikemefuna into the family by now, including him in activities with his own son.

The planting of **yams**—"the king of crops"—begins, and is very labor intensive. The men plant them, and then as the rain grows heavier, women plant other crops between the yam mounds—maize, melons, and beans. As the rain increases even more and the village rainmaker no longer claims to be able to intervene without danger to his health, children sit inside and listen to stories. The heavy rain season brings a brief period of rest between planting and harvest.

Note how only the men are allowed to handle the yams—the most important crop in Umuofia—reflecting both their strength and status in society relative to women. Also note how storytelling is the main activity for children in the extreme rainy period, emphasizing the oral culture.

Ikemefuna feels like a member of the family, telling his own folktales from the Mbaino. He and Nwoye have become very close. Nwoye looks back on this period fondly. As the rain lightens and children go out to play, they sing a song about someone named Nnadi cooking and eating alone as the rain is falling. Nwoye wonders why Nnadi should live by himself and concludes that he belongs in the land of Ikemefuna's favorite folktale.

Nwoye's attachment to Ikemefuna becomes very important to his later development and his further detachment from Okonkwo. His deep affection for Ikemefuna is demonstrated by the folktale he immediately thinks of upon hearing the children's song.

CHAPTER 5

The Feast of the New **Yam**, during which Umuofia celebrates the earth goddess, Ani, approaches. Everyone in the clan looks forward to the festival, since it heralds a season of plenty, but Okonkwo can never match this enthusiasm for feasting. He prefers working on his farm. His wives and children, however, are excited with the preparations, cleaning and decorating, and Ikemefuna in particular is excited to experience the feast.

Okonkwo's uneasiness towards feasting likely has to do with his discomfort with language—since feasts are just food and talk—which again separates him from his clan. Ikemefuna, on the other hand, is fully immersed in the activities of Umuofia.

Okonkwo finds an outlet for his anger, accusing his second wife of killing the banana tree—even though she only cut a few leaves off to wrap food. He beats her, leaving her and her daughter weeping. Okonkwo then decides to go hunting with a rusty gun, even though he's never killed anything with his gun, which prompts his second wife to murmur about guns that never shoot. Okonkwo hears this and shoots his loaded gun at his wife, who scrambles away. He misses and goes off to hunt.

Whenever Okonkwo feels uncomfortable it drives him to anger, just as how his shame at the mockery of his father made him angry when young. And when he is angry he loses control and gets violent. The anger that he considers masculine turns out to have a lot of destructive potential—when he loses control, like he did during the Week of Peace, he's unable to stop himself from acting.

The New **Yam** Festival is celebrated with joy, with in-laws arriving from different villages on the first day, before heading home after feasting. The second day brings the greatest wrestling match between Okonkwo's village and its neighbors, and Okonkwo's second wife Ekwefi is most excited by the wrestling. Many years ago, she had been the village beauty, and Okonkwo had won her heart by throwing the Cat. She married someone else because Okonkwo was too poor to pay her bride-price, but she ran away to live with Okonkwo a few years later.

Wrestling is a big tradition for Umuofia, demonstrating masculine strength. Ekwefi's story demonstrates her own strong will, running away from her first husband to be with Okonkwo, even though he couldn't afford to be with her before. She was attracted to his strength.

On the morning of the second day of the festival, Ekwefi and her only daughter Ezinma talk as she prepares a fowl to eat. Ezinma asks many questions, calling her mother by her first name and wondering why the pot doesn't burn Ekwefi even though she handles it with bare hands. Nwoye's mother calls and asks Ezinma to bring her live coals, which Ezinma stokes into a live **flame**. The drums begin beating to signal the wrestling match, and as Ekwefi prepares the meal, she hears Nwoye's sister weeping. Ikemefuna and the first wife's children file in with dinner pots, but Nwoye's sister comes empty-handed. She had been showing off to the other children when she broke her pot, but she makes up a sad story to tell her mother. When her brothers are about to tell on her, Ikemefuna silences them with a look.

Names have power in Umuofia, and Ezinma calls her mother by her first name, showing how much power she has in the relationship. Also, both Ekwefi and Ezinma handle fire deftly here, and fire is often compared to Okonkwo's spirit. This makes sense, since he is particularly fond of both of them, even though he tried to shoot Ekwefi earlier. The scene with Ikemefuna also shows how much Ikemefuna has become part of the family. He has a leadership role among the siblings, silencing the younger ones when he has to in order to keep the peace.

Ezinma brings Okonkwo a bowl of the pottage Ekwefi prepared and waits as he finishes his first wife's bowl. Her father is stern with her, berating her to sit like a woman and telling her she has little sense, but inwardly, he has a soft spot for Ezinma, who looks very much like her mother.

Okonkwo's idea of masculinity again keeps him from expressing his affection. He cares for Ezinma, but treats her sternly, just as he treats the other members of his household.

CHAPTER 6

The whole village attends the wrestling match. The initial matches begin with younger boys—15 or 16—and these matches are generally just to set the scene, but Obierika's son Maduka wins some fame by finishing his match extremely quickly. During a break in the wrestling, Ekwefi speaks with Chielo, the priestess of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. Chielo calls Ezinma "my daughter," and asks about the girl's health. She tells Ekwefi that she thinks Ezinma will stay—or live—since children usually don't die after the age of six.

Masculinity and strength are valued in Umuofia culture, so it makes sense that wrestling is such a big tradition. Here we also meet the priestess Chielo, who embodies the way in which ordinary people of the clan represent gods and goddesses (the egwugwu are another example). As she and Ekwefi discuss Ezinma, the question of fate appears—they are unsure whether she will live or die, and it is out of their hands.

The drumming begins again after the break, and two wrestling teams face off. The last match is between the leaders of the teams, and the year before, neither had thrown the other, and the judges had decided they were evenly matched. As the two leaders, Ikezue and Okafu, struggle, it looks like they will be evenly matched again this year—until Ikezue grows desperate and makes a mistake, and Okafu wins the match. Everyone carries him off, singing a song celebrating the strength and fighting prowess of Okafu.

Drums appear during most festivals and celebrations in the novel, and they also signal town meetings. Here, they signal the start of the wrestling match, and two of the village leaders wrestle in a show of masculine strength.

CHAPTER 7

Ikemefuna has spent three years in Okonkwo's household, becoming a part of his new family. He is especially close to Nwoye, who begins to enjoy performing more masculine tasks around the house, pleasing his father. Okonkwo realizes that this is due to Ikemefuna's influence, and he encourages the boys to sit with him in his obi as he tells war stories. Nwoye inwardly prefers his mother's folktales, but he pretends to disdain women's stories in order to please Okonkwo.

Ikemefuna not only has fit into the family, he has a kind of healing effect between Nwoye and Okonkwo. Okonkwo now tries to teach the boys about how to be men by telling them about war—an activity in which strength and aggression is key. While Nwoye prefers more peaceful "feminine" stories, his attachment to Ikemefuna and father inspire him to hide this fact.

The locusts arrive in Umuofia. They come once in a generation, and their arrival is celebrated as a new source of food. They arrive in the cold season after the harvests, as Okonkwo and the boys are working on the outer walls of the compound. They come in a small swarm at first, but then they descend and settle in on all the outer surfaces of the compound. As Okonkwo and the boys are enjoying their feast of locusts, Ogbuefi Ezeudu arrives to speak with Okonkwo, informing him that the clan has decided to kill Ikemefuna. Ezeudu advises him not to participate in the killing, since Ikemefuna calls him father.

Ikemefuna again represents doomed fate, or the lack of free will. The fact that he calls Okonkwo "father" is significant, especially since names are so important in Umuofia culture. By calling Okonkwo father, Ikemefuna is creating a bond that's as strong as blood. Ezeudu advises Okonkwo not to break or betray that bond. Okonkwo could even use his strength and prestige to refuse or try to change the verdict from the clan leaders.

A group of elders arrive at Okonkwo's house early the next morning to discuss Ikemefuna's fate. After they leave, Okonkwo calls Ikemefuna to tell him that he'll be taken home the next day. Nwoye bursts into tears upon hearing the news, and Okonkwo beats him heavily. The rest of the household intuits the truth, and even Ikemefuna feels that he will not really be going home.

Again, others come in to discuss Ikemefuna's fate; he has no say in what will happen to him. Okonkwo's beating of Nwoye seems like it is an example of Okonkwo trying to look strong even though he himself feels emotions similar to Nwoye.

The next day, the party sets out with Ikemefuna and Okonkwo, who disregards Ezeudu's advice. Ikemefuna is reassured by Okonkwo's presence, feeling that Okonkwo truly is his father. He imagines what it will be like to see his mother and sister again, and worries that his mother might be dead now. As he's thinking, he hears a man behind him clear his throat. When he looks back, the man growls at him to go on, and then he slices Ikemefuna with his machete. Ikemefuna cries for Okonkwo, running towards him, and Okonkwo strikes the killing blow, afraid that other will find him weak.

Ikemefuna's fate is finally carried out in this passage, and he's killed by none other than Okonkwo, who deals the killing blow because he's afraid of seeming feminine and weak. This is a critical point: Okonkwo is more concerned with looking strong to others than in protecting those whom he loves or in doing the right thing. His shame at the prospect of looking weak makes him kill a boy who had come to trust him and see him as a father, and who he saw as a son.

When Okonkwo walks into the house at night, Nwoye knows that Ikemefuna has been killed, and he feels something give way inside him—the same way he felt when he came across a set of twins left to die in the forest during the last harvest season.

Although Ikemefuna is a victim of fate, Okonkwo made the choice to strike him down. Nwoye begins to detach himself from tradition as well, repulsed by the violent customs of his people against those who are weak.

CHAPTER 8

Okonkwo doesn't eat for two days, drinking only palm-wine instead. He calls Nwoye to sit with him in his *obi*, but Nwoye is afraid of him and slips out whenever Okonkwo dozes. Okonkwo stops sleeping at night as well. On the third day, he asks Ekwefi to roast plantains for him, and Ezinma delivers the dish, telling him to finish it, since he hasn't eaten in two days. Okonkwo eats and thinks repeatedly that Ezinma should have been a boy.

The killing of Ikemefuna shakes Okonkwo, and he responds by reaching out to his son Nwoye. Yet what Okonkwo has done makes Nwoye want only to avoid him. Okonkwo seems to respect Ezinma's no-nonsense words, but his gender bias does not allow him to accept her as she is. Instead he wishes she were a boy.

Okonkwo wishes for work to distract him, but this is the season of rest between the harvest and the next planting season. He calls himself a woman for his reaction to killing Ikemefuna and decides to visit his friend Obierika. Okonkwo shakes hands with Obierika's son and then talks with Obierika talk about Okonkwo's worries for his children. Eventually, Obierika mentions that Okonkwo should not have participated in killing Ikemefuna—he calls it "the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families."

Okonkwo believes that he had no other choice when it came to striking down Ikemefuna, since the Oracle announced that Ikemefuna had to be killed—Okonkwo doesn't acknowledge that he was afraid of being seen as feminine. However, Obierika points out that just because Ikemefuna had to die does not mean Okonkwo had to participate in killing him. It is never clear whether Okonkwo's fall from this time on is a fate handed down by the goddess or the result of the same shame/violence dynamic that made Okonkwo kill Ikemefuna.

Ofoedu comes in to tell of the simultaneous passing of Ogbuefi Ndulue—the oldest man in a neighboring village—and his first wife. They discuss how close Ndulue and his wife were in their youth, and Okonkwo regards this as a sign of weakness, even as Obierika and Ofoedu discuss how strong Ndulue was, leading Umuofia to war as a young man.

Okonkwo's vision of masculinity is not one that's shared by everyone in the clan. Okonkwo sees weakness in consulting a woman, whereas the other men don't believe that such behavior lessens Ndulue's achievements.

Okonkwo begins to feel better, and he leaves to tap his palm trees. Only men without title are allowed to climb the trees to tap them, and Obierika says that he wishes he had not taken the *ozo* title sometimes, since it pains him to see inexperienced young men killing the trees in the name of tapping. Okonkwo defends this as the law of the land, however, and says it is good that their clan holds the *ozo* title in high esteem.

Okonkwo acknowledges that it's a shame to kill palms, but the value of titles are very important to him, and he's willing to defend the law in order to maintain his status. Okonkwo is unwilling to think critically about any of his clan's traditions, unlike Obierika.

Okonkwo returns to Obierika's hut later, when Obierika's daughter's suitor arrives with his relatives. They survey his daughter's body before drinking palm-wine and eating. After the pot is emptied, the suitor's family and Obierika work out his daughter's bride-price by passing broomsticks back and forth. After they settle on a bride-price of 20 bags of cowries, they criticize the bride-pricing customs of other clans. They discuss other cultures that seem strange to them, and Obierika mentions the story of white men who have no toes. One of the others makes a joke, saying that he's seen such a white man—a leper named Amadi.

We see the negotiations for the bride-price here, as well as an interesting discussion on different cultures. While we may see the broomstick method of haggling as rather demeaning, they clearly find that it is more respectful than other forms of haggling. It's also worth noting that the women have very little to do with this negotiation—in many ways in Umuofia society women are treated as objects to be traded by the men.

CHAPTER 9

Okonkwo begins to sleep well again after three nights, but then Ekwefi wakes him in the morning by banging on his door. She says that Ezinma is dying, and Okonkwo rushes to Ekwefi's hut. He begins preparing a medicine of leaves and grasses and barks, while Ekwefi kneels beside Ezinma, measuring her fever. Ekwefi and Ezinma have a very close relationship that encompasses the companionship of equals in some ways, in addition to the mother-daughter bond. Her daughter calls her by her first name, and she sneaks Ezinma delicacies such as eggs.

The fact that Ezinma calls Ekwefi by her first name is significant because it demonstrates how their relationship is that of equals in some ways. Okonkwo also demonstrates that he cares for Ezinma when he springs to action, gathering medicines. This is still in keeping with his idea of masculinity, since he is more comfortable with actions than he is with words.

Ekwefi's nine previous children died in infancy, and a medicine man said that each child was in fact the same *ogbanje*, one of the wicked children who died and entered their mothers' wombs to be born again. By the time Ezinma was born, Ekwefi had lost hope, but when Ezinma lived past the age of six, she became determined to nurse her child to health. A year ago, a medicine man had also dug up Ezinma's *iyi-uwa*, a smooth pebble that held her connection to the world of *ogbanje*, giving Ekwefi further hope. However, with this new fever, Ekwefi begins to worry again.

Here we see an example of some of the beliefs that the Umuofia hold regarding childbirth and deaths. Although they believe that Ekwefi is cursed with an ogbanje, she fights back with the medicine man's ritual. There is some question as to how much she can actually control the fate of her child.

Okonkwo returns with ingredients, and he and Ekwefi prepare the medicine. Once the medicine is ready, he forces Ezinma to sit under a blanket with the steaming pot. She struggles, but is held down, and when at least the blanket is removed, she falls asleep on a dry mat.

This is a traditional form of medication, and again Okonkwo demonstrates his care through more masculine actions as opposed to feminine words.

CHAPTER 10

Large crowds gather around the *ilo*, or the village playground, as soon as the sun's heat starts to soften. The ceremony is for men, but women look on from the fringe of the crowd. The ceremony turns out to be a trial between one group, consisting of a woman, Mgbafo, and her brothers, and another group made up of Mgbafo's husband, Uzowulu, and his family.

The men are more involved in the justice system, with the women only participating on the edges of the ceremony. Yet it is important to note that the clan does have a justice system, a fact not necessarily understood by white men who treat the Umuofia as savages.

The gong sounds and the nine *egwugwu* run out of the house. The nine *egwugwu* represent the nine villages of Umuofia, and their leader is called Evil Forest. The narrator points out that one of the *egwugwu* has the springy walk of Okonkwo, but if anybody notices, they keep this fact to themselves.

The justice system is combined with the religion in Umuofia, just like it is in the white man's society. Also note how the clan knows that the egwugwu are really just symbols, are men in masks that they know and have elevated to these positions. There is sophistication to this sort of understanding that most white men never seem to recognize.

The trial begins with a ritual introduction during which Evil Forest questions Uzowulu. He says that Mgbafo is his wife and that his in-laws came to his house, beat him up, and took his wife and children away one day. Odukwe, Mgbafo's brother, concedes that he took the wife and children away, but he explains that it is because Uzowulu brutally beat his wife every day, even causing a miscarriage and almost killing her once. Uzowulu's neighbors are called as witnesses, and they agree that he beat his wife. The *egwugwu* decide that Uzowulu should bring an offering of palm-wine to his in-laws and beg for his wife to return, and that the in-laws should let Mgbafo go if Uzowulu brings the wine, ending this case. As the chapter closes, another trial over land begins.

Note how Mgbafo is not allowed to speak for herself at the trial. It is her brother who defends her, showing again that men dominate the government. The trial takes a complicated situation and works out a solution among those involved that keeps the peace, cements social bonds, and does so without imprisonment or violent punishment. In some ways, this justice system could be seen as being just as sophisticated and perhaps more merciful than that of the white man.

CHAPTER 11

One moonless night, Ezinma and Ekwefi sit in their hut telling stories. Ekwefi tells the story of a clever tortoise who tricks the birds into helping him get a feast in the sky. He tricks them by convincing them to take on different names, while he takes on the name "All of you." When he asks the people of the sky for whom they have prepared the feast, they say they've prepared it for "all of you," and as a result, the tortoise eats his fill before any of the birds can. In their anger, the birds tell the tortoise's wife to put out all the hard things in the house to break the tortoise's fall, which ends up shattering his shell, resulting in its broken appearance.

Ekwefi and Ezinma share the tradition of storytelling in their hut at night. Ekwefi's story emphasizes the importance of names, since the tortoise manages to trick everyone by changing their names. This story also explains the world around them: why the tortoise shell looks the way it does. This telling of stories between mother and child is universal, no different than what goes on in white households across the world.

Ezinma complains that there is no song in the story, and she begins her turn to tell. Suddenly, a high-pitched voice breaks off her storytelling, and Chielo arrives. She says that the god Agbala wants to see Ezinma in his house in the hills and the caves. Ekwefi says that she will go too, but Chielo curses her and commands her not to go. Chielo tells Ezinma, who is very afraid, to climb on her back. Together, they depart. Ekwefi makes up her mind to follow, and Okonkwo doesn't stop her.

It seems that once religion commands that something is done, it becomes fated. In this way, once the Oracle demands to see Ezinma, she can't refuse, and her parents can't refuse to let her go. Yet also notice that, unlike Okonkwo, who gave in to the rule of the clan leaders and killed Ikemefuna, Ekwefi defies Chielo's orders and follows after. She has a mind to protect her daughter.

The night is very dark, and Ekwefi has to run to keep up with Chielo. She becomes more and more afraid, wondering what she should do when they reach the cave. At some point, Chielo realizes that someone is walking behind her and screams for Agbala to curse the presence. Ekwefi is afraid—she continues to follow but at a greater distance. The journey is long, and late in the night they finally approach their destination in the caves. Chielo chants continuously.

Chielo seems to have supernatural strength here, infused by the gods. Ekwefi decides to fight fate with her strong will, following Chielo against her wishes.

Ekwefi begins to doubt herself, wondering if she can do anything if something happens to Ezinma in the caves. When Chielo and Ezinma enter the cave mouth, however, Ekwefi vows that if she hears Ezinma cry, she'll rush into the cave to defend her. She sits and waits for a long time and then spins around when she hears noise behind her. It's Okonkwo.

Ekwefi continues to follow Chielo despite her doubts and fears, revealing how strong her will is. She comes to the conclusion that she is willing to protect her daughter no matter the consequences. Again note the contrast to Okonkwo and Ekwefi. Though it appears that Okonkwo has come this time to support her.

Okonkwo sits down to wait with Ekwefi, and she recalls their younger days together, when she ran away from her first husband to be with Okonkwo. She had knocked at his door on the way to fetch water, and he carried her into his bed, untying her cloth.

As they wait, Okonkwo and Ekwefi tell stories—a story of her attraction to Okonkwo's masculinity. Even then, she took matters into her own hands and ran away from her husband in a show of free will.

CHAPTER 12

The next morning, the neighborhood is celebrating Obierika's daughter's *uri*—the day on which her suitor brings palm-wine to her kinsmen. Women and children begin to gather to help the bride's mother cook for the whole village. Ekwefi is exhausted from the previous night. Chielo had crawled out of the shrine with Ezinma sleeping on her back in the morning and walked back to the village with Okonkwo and his wife trailing behind at a distance. Chielo put Ezinma to bed and walked away in silence.

Chielo is still in priestess mode as she returns Ezinma to her bed and leaves without a word. The neighborhood is also celebrating Obierika's daughter, and we get a glimpse into how the women and children work together to finish the preparations.

As the women head out, Okonkwo feels very tired and sleepy, since he didn't sleep at all the night before, out of worry for Ezinma. Obierika's compound is busy with preparations for the *uri*, cooking **yams** and cassava, preparing goats for the soup. Things are going smoothly until a cow gets loose, and most of the women go out to chase it back to its owner, who pays a heavy fine.

Okonkwo once again hides his worry, because he considers showing any emotions other than anger to be feminine. We also see another example of how Umuofia preserves order by extracting fines from those who break the structure of their society.

Early in the afternoon, the first two pots of palm-wine from Obierika's in-laws arrive, and they're presented to the women. Obierika's friends and relatives arrive soon afterwards and discuss how many pots of wine the in-laws might bring. They worry that the in-laws might be closefisted, but the in-laws end up bringing fifty pots in total, when Okonkwo had only predicted thirty.

Another Umuofia custom is described in great detail. Through all the ceremonies and traditions described in the book, Achebe shows us that the Igbo people aren't "primitive" and simple, as the white men think of them. In fact, these traditions aren't all that dissimilar from Western traditions.

Obierika presents kola nuts to his in-laws, and their families formally announce their alliance. The families and friends feast, and as night falls, the girls begin to dance. The bride comes out with a rooster in her right hand, presenting it to the musicians before she also begins to dance. When the guests leave, they take the bride with them to spend seven market weeks with her suitor's family. Okonkwo makes them a gift of two roosters.

We see more Igbo traditions described here, including the one that says the bride will live with the suitor's family for seven market weeks. The fact that the bride is the one who is obligated to leave her family once again reveals the power dynamic to lean in favor of the man of the household.

CHAPTER 13

Drums and cannons signal the death of Ezeudu, the oldest man in the village. Okonkwo shivers as he remembers the last time the old man had visited him and advised him not to participate in the killing of Ikemefuna.

Drums and cannons traditionally signal that there is news in the village. Okonkwo's killing of Ikemefuna continues to affect him, though he would never show or admit this to anyone.

The entire clan attends Ezeudu's funeral, as he was a great warrior and held three titles, and even *egwugwu* show up to pay their respects. The ceremony involves a lot of tumult—the beating of drums, firing of guns, clanging of machetes. In the midst of the last gunshots and cannon fire, it's discovered that Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son has been killed by a piece of iron from Okonkwo's gun.

The masked gods show up to honor Ezeudu, showing how important he was in the clan. Okonkwo's accident with the gun is a turning point in the plot that can be said to be purely an act of fate, also, since he couldn't control the splintering of the gun. On the other hand, it could also be seen as just an accident.

Because Okonkwo has killed a fellow clansman, he must flee the clan, but since the crime is of the "female" variety—meaning it's accidental—he's allowed to return after seven years. He and his family pack up their belongings, and friends help them store their **yams** in Obierika's barn. Just before dawn, they flee to Okonkwo's motherland, Mbanta.

The fact that the type of crime is described in gendered terms shows how much masculine/feminine ideals are embedded even in the language. A "female" crime is an accident, committed without intent, whereas a "male" crime is more aggressive and purposeful.

As the day breaks, a crowd of men from Ezeudu's quarter set **fire** to Okonkwo's houses, killing his animals and destroying his barn. They do this simply out of justice for the earth goddess rather than out of personal anger. Obierika joins in but wonders why a man must be so severely punished for an accidental crime. He thinks back to his wife's twin children, whom he had been forced to leave to die in the forest because of the law of the land.

The clan feels a sense of inevitability when they carry out traditional punishments such as this one, since they believe that the gods will punish the entire land otherwise. They act not out of personal malice or anger but because they feel they must. Yet there are those who question these traditions, such as Obierika.

CHAPTER 14

Okonkwo's kinsmen in Mbanta receive him and his family kindly. Uchendu, Okonkwo's mother's younger brother, is now the eldest surviving member of that family. Okonkwo is given a plot of ground to build his compound, and two or three pieces of land to farm during the planting season. Uchendu's sons even contribute **seed-yams** for Okonkwo to farm.

In Umuofia tradition, family is very important, and Okonkwo's mother's kinsmen receive him kindly as part of the family, even though Uchendu hasn't seen him in years.

After the rain, Okonkwo and his family work hard to plant a new farm, but Okonkwo is discouraged by his circumstances and no longer takes the same pleasure in labor. He concludes that the saying that if a man says yes his *chi* also says yes is not a true saying, since in his case, his *chi* said no despite his own affirmation.

The proverb about chi is repeated here, but this time it's reversed, as Okonkwo has fallen upon hard times. In his sadness, he has come to believe that he cannot in fact control his fate. Instead, he believes that it controls him.

Uchendu sees Okonkwo's despair and decides he will talk to him after the ceremony for his youngest son, who is marrying a new wife. The ceremony of confession is the last step in the marriage, and all the daughters of the family sit in a circle with the bride and Uchendu in the center. The bride must confess whether she has slept with any other men. She says she has not, and so she is fit to marry.

Here is another part of the marriage ceremony. Note how the bride must be "pure" in order to be fit to marry. No such questions appear to be put to the groom.

Uchendu calls Okonkwo together with his relatives. He tells his family why Okonkwo is now living with them and then asks whether they know why Nneka, or "Mother is Supreme" is a common name for children, when men are always the head of families. No one answers, and Uchendu asks another question. He asks why a woman is buried with her own kinsmen rather than with her husband's kinsmen. Again, Okonkwo and the others do not know. Uchendu advises Okonkwo to be grateful for the comfort his motherland provides. He says that while a child belongs to his father when things are good, it's the mother who is there to protect and comfort in times of need.

Uchendu is a great talker, often telling stories and speaking at length. Here he tells Okonkwo to be grateful for his motherland, and he does so in a roundabout way that examines the role of mother and father—one is there to protect, and the other is there to own and claim. Uchenda's appreciation for the role of mothers—of women—is notable in that Okonkwo seems only to value men rather than women. Uchenda's view is more balanced.

CHAPTER 15

In the second year of Okonkwo's exile, Obierika comes to visit him, bringing two heavy bags of cowries. Okonkwo and his family are very happy to see Obierika, and Okonkwo presents him to Uchendu, who speaks of Obierika's father and the old days when people would visit distant clans. As he's talking, Uchendu mentions the clan of Abame, and Obierika says that their clan has been wiped out.

Uchendu's character is older and can speak of how the clans' traditions and customs have been changing over time. Okonkwo, however, seems to want traditions to never change—he has a rigid desire to try to keep things exactly as they are. This stands in contrast to Uchendu and Obierika, who seem to have a more nuanced understanding that things do change over time, according to necessity and changing ideas.

Obierika tells of how a white man visited Abame during the last planting season. Their Oracle said that the strange man would destroy their clan, so the Abame killed the white man and tied his iron horse, or bicycle, to a tree. Then one day, three other white men came by, saw the bicycle, and went away again. For weeks, nothing else happened, but then, on a big market day, the white men came back with a large number of others and surrounded the market. They began to shoot and everybody was killed, except for those who had not been in the market that day.

The Abame kill the white man because their Oracle said he would destroy their clan. But in killing the white man the tribe set in motion the events that really do destroy the clan. In killing the white man were they fulfilling or fighting fate? It is also worth noting that the first real story of the white man among the Igbo is one of conflict, violence, and destruction.

Uchendu bursts out that they should not have killed the first white man in Abame. "Never kill a man who says nothing," he says. Okonkwo agrees that they were fools and should have armed themselves in preparation.

Uchendu uses a folktale to illustrate the importance of language—he depicts silence as ominous. And it is true—the white men arrive quietly, and the clan allows them to stay, but they soon take over. Okonkwo agrees that the Abame were foolish, but only because they did not arm themselves to fight the white men. He sees violence as the answer.

Okonkwo's first wife cooks dinner and Nwoye brings the wine. After dinner, Obierika mentions that the money in the bags is for Okonkwo's **yams.** Obierika says that he will continue to sell them in Umuofia every year until Okonkwo's return. Okonkwo thanks him.

Yams are the most traditional meal and a measure of wealth, providing Okonkwo with currency to use. Obierika offers Okonkwo true friendship.

CHAPTER 16

Two years later, Obierika returns to Mbanta to visit Okonkwo, this time with news that the white missionaries have come to Umuofia. Furthermore, he reports that Okonkwo's eldest son, Nwoye, is among them, which is why Obierika has come to see Okonkwo. Okonkwo refuses to discuss Nwoye, so it is only from Nwoye's mother that Obierika hears what happened.

Nwoye represents the changing world of the clans, as a young person who has joined the Christians. The new religion is bringing changes to Mbanta and Umuofia. Okonkwo continues to refuse to discuss—to use language—regarding any issue that displeases him.

The missionaries arrived some time earlier in Mbanta, causing a stir. Although everyone came to see the white men, most clansmen didn't take them very seriously. The villagers made fun of the translator, whose dialect of Igbo makes him sound like he's saying "my buttocks" instead of "myself." However, Nwoye was captivated by the hymn he heard about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear. It reminded him of the twins crying in the bush and of Ikemefuna.

The Mbanta did not think of the white men as a threat because they spoke little, and when they did speak didn't speak well. Yet it is the very quietness or gentleness of the white men's religion that attracts Nwoye, and it is implied through Nwoye's thoughts about the abandoned twins that the Christian religion may appeal to the other members of the clans who feel oppressed or powerless.

CHAPTER 17

The missionaries ask for a plot of land on which to build their church, and Uchendu gives them a plot in Mbanta's Evil Forest. The next morning, the missionaries begin clearing the forest in order to build a church, and the inhabitants of Mbanta expect them all to be dead within four days. When none of them die, they win their first three converts.

The missionaries' actions begin to challenge the clan's beliefs—by building a church in the forest and not *dying they show either that the forest isn't actually dangerous or that their own god is stronger than the forces of the forest, which is likely why the first three people converted.*

Nwoye keeps his attraction to the new faith a secret, not wishing to anger his father, but he strays near the church and listens to the singing on Sundays.

The music draws Nwoye to the church on Sundays, but he knows that his father, who approves of tradition and masculinity, would disapprove.

The Mbanta assume that their gods and ancestors will punish the white men in twenty-eight days, since their gods are sometimes long-suffering, but never permit a man to defy them longer than that. However, when the day comes that all the missionaries should die, they're all still alive, winning them a handful more converts. Among them is a woman named Nneka, who has had four previous sets of twins, all of which had immediately been thrown away after being born.

The church wins the most converts when it seems more powerful than the clan's religion. In addition, the new religion attracts those who have suffered under the old religion, such as Nneka. Those who have been caused grief by the old traditions want *change.*

One morning, Okonkwo's cousin, Amikwu, passes by the church and sees Nwoye among the Christians. He tells Okonkwo what he's seen, and when Nwoye returns to the compound, Okonkwo attacks him, gripping him by the neck and demanding to know where he's been. Uchendu stops Okonkwo, who lets go of Nwoye, and Nwoye walks out and never returns. He decides to join the Christians in Umuofia.

Nwoye seems to be attracted to the Christians because they offer a less violent option (of course, as we'll see, they can be pretty violent too). Okonkwo's physically violent reaction to seeing Nwoye among the Christians is therefore exactly the wrong thing—in trying to force Nwoye to stay, he in fact pushes him away. Nwoye, like others who feel mistreated by the old traditions, naturally move toward the new option. They represent the change within the clan.

Okonkwo sits in his hut, wondering how he could have been cursed with such a son. He thinks of his own nickname as the "Roaring Flame," and wonders how he could have borne a weak son like Nwoye. Then, as he gazes into the **fire**, he realizes that "living fire begets cold, impotent ash."

This is the first instance we see Okonkwo employ a metaphor, since he's usually straightforward and blunt. He believes that his strength fostered feminine qualities in Nwoye. He doesn't see that this same aggression will eventually burn him out as well, since fire eventually consumes its source.

CHAPTER 18

At first, the Mbanta remain relatively unworried about the church in the Evil Forest. They have little interaction, until the missionaries overstep their bounds. Three converts—villages who have converted to Christianity— boast that the Mbanta gods are dead and that they will burn their shrines. This talk outrages the villagers, who beat the converts. Nothing happens between the church and the clan for a while afterwards.

The new religion begins to clash more with the clan's traditions, creating conflict. Interestingly, it's the converts to Christianity who are most aggressive, as if now they want to prove that their choice was the right one. Though nothing major has happened yet, we begin to see hints that larger conflict is on its way.

Rumors begin to spread that the white men are bringing their government as well as their religion, using their court system to judge clan members. In Mbanta, these stories still seem like myth, however, since Mr. Kiaga, the interpreter seems harmless. As for the converts, they're still considered clan members, so killing one of them would result in exile.

The rumors that the church and government are entwined foreshadow the white man's eventual takeover. In fact, this is another place where the clan and the white man's system converge, since in Umuofia's justice system, their masked gods decide the outcomes of trials. Notice how the Christian's lack of aggression makes them sneakily powerful, allowing them to build a strong position without arousing a response from the clan.

The church begins to accept outcasts, or *osu*, as members, causing a stir among the converts, who say that the heathens will ridicule them for accepting *osu* into their church. Mr. Kiaga insists that they accept them anyway, since they are all children before God. In this manner, he loses one of the converts, but gains some very strong converts in the former outcasts.

The white man's religion begins to overturn the clan's hierarchy—it is a feature of the religion that they accept the weak and the powerless, and in so doing they give those powerless newfound power and cause the hierarchical structure of the clan to begin to fall apart.

One of the outcasts, however, brings the church into conflict with the clan when he kills the royal python, the most revered animal in Mbanta. The clan decides to ostracize the Christians, preventing them from using the stream. When Mr. Kiaga demands to know why, they explain that they believe Okoli, one of the converts, killed the royal python. Okoli himself falls ill and dies, showing the clan members that the gods are fighting back. They decide to pursue no further actions against the Christians.

Again, note how it's the converts who are the most aggressive—who wish to punish those who still hold to the traditions that once oppressed them and to exercise the power they feel they have gained by converting. The clan members still have some faith in their religion, however, and they believe that their gods are stepping in to fight for them after Okoli dies from illness. Yet the clan seems to think that once their own gods have shown their power that the white men will back off or relent, that things are even between them.

CHAPTER 19

Okonkwo reaches the end of his seven years in Mbanta, bitter that he has lost the opportunity to climb to the top of the clan in Umuofia. Although his mother's people have been kind to him, he still regrets the time lost there. He sends money to Obierika to build two huts for him in his old compound so that his family can live there until he can build more.

Okonkwo laments his fate, which he believes has prevented him from becoming a great man in spite of his strong will. Still, he wants to return to Umuofia, the people of his father's line. He wants to be connected to the masculine.

As the final rainy months of his exile draw to a close, Okonkwo decides to throw a feast for his mother's kinsmen to show his gratitude. Ekwefi harvests her cassava, and Okonkwo slaughters three goats and a number of fowl, making for an extravagant feast.

Because Okonkwo is a strict adherent to tradition, he decides to throw a traditionally extravagant feast to thank his mother's family.

As the oldest member of the extensive family, Uchendu breaks the kola nut before the feast, praying to the ancestors for health and children. The food is then laid out and everyone begins to eat. Towards the end of the meal, one of the oldest kinsmen rises to thank Okonkwo and to warn the younger generation about forgetting the bonds of kinship. He reiterates that he fears for the clan before again thanking Okonkwo for the feast.

The feast showcases many of the customs we are already familiar with from the book. Additionally, the old kinsman who makes the speech exhibits the importance of language by speaking at length to thank Okonkwo for the meal.

CHAPTER 20

Okonkwo returns to his clan knowing that seven years is a long time to be away. He realizes that he has lost his chance to lead his clan against the new religion and his chance to claim the highest titles. However, he still believes that he can return with a flourish. He plans to rebuild his compound on a more magnificent scale, with room for two new wives. He also plans to initiate his sons into the *ozo* society. After Nwoye joined the Christians, he told his other sons that they could follow in Nwoye's steps if they wanted to, but that he would curse them and haunt them after his death.

Okonkwo is not prepared for all the changes that have occurred in his clan. He believes that he can attain the same status by showcasing his masculinity and strength as he did before. He treats his others sons in just the same way he treated Nwoye—primarily he threatens them to get them to "be strong" and do as he wants.

Ezinma has grown into one of the most beautiful girls in Mbanta. She is called the Crystal of Beauty, just as Ekwefi had been called in her youth. She has many marriage prospects in Mbanta, but refuses them all because she knows that her father would like her to marry in Umuofia. She gets her half-sister Obiageli to do the same. Okonkwo continues to wish that Ezinma were a boy, since she understands him best out of all his children. He hopes that his daughters will also attract considerable attention in Umuofia.

Ezinma's relationship with Okonkwo reveals more about Okonkwo's views of masculinity. Because she is his favorite child, he wishes that she had been born a boy, showing that he thinks highly of her and believes she could have attained a high standing in society. At the same time, he hopes that, as a beautiful, marriageable woman she will help him to rebuild his own power and prestige.

In the seven years of Okonkwo's exile, the church has grown to influence more of Umuofia's culture. More clan members have converted, including some men of title. The white men have also built a court where a District Commissioner judges cases, and messengers called *kotma* guard the prison. The messengers are especially hated for being arrogant and foreign, and they earn a nickname of Ashy-Buttocks because of the ash-colored shorts of their uniform.

The white men's religion has grown in influence, and once it gained that influence the white men brought in their own government as well that now exercises power as well—it judges cases as the egwugwu once did and exacts punishments in its prison. It is, in other words, effectively destroying the sovereignty of Umuofia society. The clan retaliates with ridicule and language, calling the court messengers names, but this doesn't achieve much for them.

Upon hearing these things, Okonkwo wonders why the clan does not fight back and expel the white men. Obierika replies that is it already too late and that many of their own men and sons have joined the Christians. He mentions a case where the white men hanged Aneto over a land dispute, when in Umuofia's justice system, he would have been exiled instead. Obierika says that there is no way for the white man to understand Umuofia customs when he doesn't even speak the same language.

Once the new religion converts clan members, it becomes impossible to fight them off because the clan would effectively be fighting itself. The story of the case and its punishment shows both how the white man's justice system has replaced the Umuofia system and that, despite what you might expect, the white man's system can actually be more brutal than that of the Umuofia (even though the white men certainly think of the Umuofia as "savages"). Obierika and Okonkwo's conversation reveals the importance of language—without a common language, Obierika believes that it's impossible to understand another culture's customs.

CHAPTER 21

Many people in Umuofia do not feel as strongly as Okonkwo does about getting rid of the white men. Although the white men bring a strange religion, they also bring a trading store, allowing money to flow into Umuofia. Even the religion is beginning to take hold due to the efforts of Mr. Brown, a white missionary who approaches conversion in a respectful and restrained manner, attempting to understand the clan's own traditions. He prevents members of the church from provoking the clan, particularly in the case of Enoch, a fanatical convert whose father was the priest of the snake cult.

Mr. Brown pursues a peaceful change, a change founded on respect. Undoubtedly his goal is to convert people of Umuofia to Christianity, which has and will continue to result in vast changes to Umuofia society. But he does so respectfully, and seems to see things of value in Umuofia culture. Put another way, he seems willing to be influenced by the Umuofia just as he is influencing them.

Mr. Brown makes friends with some of the great men of the clan, and in one of the neighboring villages, he discusses religion with a great clansman named Akunna. Neither one of them succeeds in converting the other, but they do gain a better understanding of the other's religion. Akunna also points out several similarities between the clan's religion and the Christian faith, likening Mr. Brown's presence to the clan's wooden carvings—both are representations of God on earth, among people.

Mr. Brown wins friends in the clan by conversing with them, demonstrating again the power of language. We learn more about the complexity of the Umuofia religion as well. The clan members don't blindly believe in wooden structures and masked figures, but they regard them as conduits for their faith. White men who do not take time to converse with the Umuofia are likely to think of them as mere savages who think that those masks and wooden idols are real rather than symbolic.

Mr. Brown uses his understanding to convert more clan members to the church. He builds a school and a hospital and begs families to send their children to the school. He says that clan leaders in the future will be those who can read and write, and his arguments begin to have an effect. More people begin to enroll in his school as they see the quick results of schooling, including earning a clerkship or becoming a teacher. Mr. Brown's health begins to break down, however, and he has to leave Umuofia shortly after Okonkwo's return. He attempts to greet Okonkwo with news of his son Nwoye upon Okonkwo's return, but Okonkwo drives him out with threats.

Written language begins to take over the oral tradition in Umuofia, as the ability to be literate becomes a mark of power and wealth in the clan (as opposed to, say, farming yams). As these new opportunities become evident, those who can benefit from them (i.e. those who are not or are unlikely to be) rich or powerful because they are not physically powerful or strong farmers, convert to the new religion and its associated values. Okonkwo's threats to Mr. Brown show that he still holds to the old traditions, though.

Okonkwo's return is not as memorable as he hopes, even though his daughters do arouse interest among suitors. Umuofia is too busy with the changes brought by the new religion and government to pay much attention to Okonkwo's return. Okonkwo mourns for the men of Umuofia, whom he believes have become "soft like women."

Okonkwo planned to have a memorable return based on traditional methods of gaining attention and status in the clan, but things have changed so much that his plans fall through. He blames this on the clan's loss of respect for masculinity and strength.

CHAPTER 22

Reverend Smith replaces Mr. Brown, and in contrast to Mr. Brown's policy of compromise, Mr. Smith encourages extreme acts to provoke the clan. He criticizes Mr. Brown's methods, thinking that Mr. Brown sought nothing but numbers—as opposed to true powerful Christian faith—in his conversions.

Reverend Smith is a more extreme religious leader. He believes his faith is the one true faith, that he has nothing to learn from the Umuofia, and he recognizes the power the whites now wield and so he wants to create conflict.

Reverend Smith encourages over-zealous converts like Enoch, leading Enoch to enrage the clan during an annual ceremony in honor of the earth deity. As the *egwugwu* begin to retire during the ceremony, Enoch boasts that they wouldn't dare touch a Christian. When the *egwugwu* come back to prove him wrong, he tears the mask off of one of the *egwugwu*.

The two religions finally clash in a major confrontation. Enoch destroys an important symbol of the Umuofia religion when he pulls the mask off the egwugwu. Enoch, formerly powerless, here makes a show of his newfound might.

That night, the Mother of the Spirits walks the length of the clan, weeping and wailing. The masked *egwugwu* assemble in the marketplace the next day before heading for Enoch's compound. The Christians decide to hide Enoch in the parsonage for a day or two, which disappoints him, as he had been hoping for a holy war. The *egwugwu* burn down Enoch's compound and move on to the church, where Reverend Smith and his interpreter, Okeke, meet them. Ajofia, the leading *egwugwu* of Umuofia, speaks to the two men, saying that they will not be harmed, but that they should not stand in the way of the *egwugwu*. Reverend Smith refuses to move, but he cannot save his church. The church Mr. Brown built is burned to the ground, and the clan is momentarily pacified.

The clan retaliates against the Christians by doing the same thing that Enoch did—they destroy the symbol of Christianity by burning down the church. Remember back to earlier judgments by the egwugwu, in which they would adjudicate conflicts by determining what price a guilty person must pay to make up their wrong action against another person. Here they do something similar: they force the whites to pay a "fine" (losing their church) equal in value to their offense (ripping off the mask). And they seem to think the matter is settled. But, of course, it is not. They have misunderstood their own eroded power as well as the willingness of the Christians to accept or agree that this is a fair exchange.

CHAPTER 23

Okonkwo is pleased that the village has retaliated, feeling that this is a return to the warlike men of Umuofia. For two days after the destruction of the church, nothing happens. Even so, all the men in Umuofia walk around armed with a gun or a machete. When the District Commissioner returns from his tour, Mr. Smith goes to speak with him, and three days afterwards, the District Commissioner asks all the leaders of Umuofia to meet in his headquarters. This invitation was not surprising to them, but they decide to attend the meeting armed with machetes.

Okonkwo was one of the leaders who pushed for an aggressive retaliation, and he's pleased that the village men are acting manlier. Also, the fact that the invitation to see the Commissioner isn't strange to the clan leaders shows how much the traditions of the clan have changed already to incorporate the white men. The clan leaders clearly think that they are in a position of power and are being treated with respect.

At the meeting, the District Commissioner tricks them, handcuffing the men while Ekwueme is telling the story of Enoch's crime. The District Commissioner tells them that they cannot burn people's houses and places of worship, and that they will be released after the village pays a fine of two hundred bags of cowries. The clan leaders do not respond, and the District Commissioner leaves them with the court messengers, instructing them to treat the men with respect.

The white government completely ignores the laws and structures that are already in place in Umuofia. They punish the clan leaders based on their own laws from their own country.

The court messengers, however, shave the men's heads as soon as the District Commissioner leaves. The court messengers do not allow the clan leaders to leave when they need to urinate, and starve them for three days. On the third day, Okonkwo angrily says that they should have killed the white man, and he's overheard by a court messenger who rushes in to beat the men with a stick.

The court messengers, meanwhile, now see their chance to abuse the leaders of the clan, who are no longer all-powerful.

The court messengers tell the villagers that their leaders will not be released unless the village pays a fine of two hundred and fifty bags of cowries—increasing the amount by fifty so that they can take a cut. The villagers don't know what to do or what to believe, and Ezinma breaks her twenty-eight day visit to her husband's family when she hears that her father has been imprisoned. It's decided that the village will pay the fine, and they gather the two hundred and fifty bags of cowries.

With all the major changes happening in the community, there's bound to be corruption as well. The court messengers take advantage of the language barrier and confusion to cheat the village of more money. In paying the fine—just as the Mbaino paid the "fine" of Ikemefuna and the virgin to Umuofia early in the novel—the Umuofia are admitting that they do not have the power to fight the white men. The world has changed.

CHAPTER 24

Okonkwo and the other leaders are set free once the fine is paid, but they leave in brooding silence, not speaking to any of the clansmen they pass. Ezinma prepares a meal for her father, and he eats only to please her, even though he has no appetite.

The silence is ominous. The unwillingness of the leaders to speak with the other villagers attests to the shame they feel at their treatment and the loss of power it symbolizes. Okonkwo's loss of appetite similarly expresses his shame and loss of his sense of masculine power.

The village crier beats his gong at night and arranges another meeting in the morning. Okonkwo sleeps very little that night, anticipating war with excitement. He swears vengeance against the white man's court. As he considers the meeting the next day, he decides the greatest obstacle in Umuofia is a speaker named Egonwanne. Okonkwo blames him for persuading the clan to be less aggressive and decides that if the clan listens to Egonwanne tomorrow, he will plan his own revenge.

Okonkwo associates Egonwanne's speeches with feminine tactics of persuasion. He wants to take a more aggressive route and go to war. This reveals part of Okonkwo's difficulty fitting into the clan, however—language is important in communicating at town meetings, and Okonkwo struggles with words.

The marketplace fills as the sun rises, and Obierika and Okonkwo go to the meeting place together. Okonkwo looks for Egonwanne in the crowd and spots him, and prepares to speak against him if Egonwanne advises against war. Okika, one of the six men who had been imprisoned, begins to speak, urging the clan to go to war even though it means fighting their former brothers.

Okika prepares a persuasive speech to stir the clansmen to war. However, the tradition of gathering everyone in the marketplace to speak orally reveals to the white men that something is going on.

The meeting is interrupted by the arrival of five court messengers. Upon seeing them, Okonkwo, filled with hate, springs to his feet and confronts the head messenger. The court messenger says that the white man has ordered the meeting to stop, and in a flash, Okonkwo draws his machete and strikes the man down. Okonkwo senses that the tribe will not go to war. He knows this because he can hear voices from his clan asking: “Why did he do it?” Okonkwo leaves.

It can be argued that Okonkwo's murder of the court messenger is both an act of fate and an act of free will. Even though he chooses to strike down the messenger, his temperament and all the circumstances of his life have led up to this moment, making it almost impossible for him to do anything else. Okonkwo has based his entire existence on being a powerful man devoted to the traditions of his society. He cannot respond to someone else wielding power or refusing to honor those traditions, so he responds in the only way he knows how—with violence. But the tribe recognizes its inferior position to the whites and its members do not want to die—they don't want to fight a war they are destined to lose.

CHAPTER 25

The District Commissioner arrives at Okonkwo's compound with an armed band of soldiers and court messengers and demands to see Okonkwo. Obierika says that Okonkwo is not there, and the District Commissioner grows angry, threatening to lock them all up unless they produce Okonkwo. The clansmen present discuss and then Obierika tells the Commissioner that they will show him where Okonkwo is and that perhaps the Commissioner can help them. The Commissioner is confused by this statement, and thinks to himself that "one of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words."

The Commissioner's thought about the Igbo people's "love of superfluous words" reveals a lack of understanding as to how important speech-making and proverbs are to Igbo's oral traditions. It's one of the main sources from which the clan's and the white man's misunderstandings stem.

Obierika leads the way with five or six others, and the Commissioner follows along with his men. They're led to a tree behind Okonkwo's compound where they find Okonkwo's body dangling. Obierika suggests that perhaps the Commissioner's men can help bring his body down and bury him, since it is against Umuofia custom to bury a man who has taken his own life. Only strangers may touch the body of someone who has committed suicide. The District Commissioner takes interest in this custom.

Okonkwo killed himself because it was the only option left to him as a way to preserve his independence. Yet at the same time it is an action that is deeply at odds with Umuofia traditions. The other men can't even touch him. Okonkwo's traditional insistence on masculine strength has, in this changing world, actually made him profoundly break with tradition and turned him, in death, into a kind of outcast. The Commissioner finds the Umuofia tradition of not touching the body of a suicide interesting in a kind of paternal way, as another indication of the unsophisticated savagery of these people (when we, as readers of the novel, know that the Umuofia are a complicated and sophisticated people, just like the white men themselves).


The Commissioner orders his chief messenger to take down the body and to bring all the men to court. He walks away, taking a few soldiers with him, and thinks about all he has learned in the years he's spent in Africa. He thinks about the book he plans to write on his experiences, and muses that this suicide would make a good chapter. He's already decided on a title for the book as well, calling it *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

The Commissioner's condescending title, which calls the Igbo people "primitive," reveals how little he has actually come to understand all the complex customs that are described throughout Things Fall Apart. It also draws attention to the power of written language—because the Commissioner's book will be written down, his words will be the authoritative viewpoint on the Igbo people, even though it's clearly biased. He thinks of them as primitives to be pacified, and so will the rest of the world. Yet in writing Things Fall Apart, and in putting the commissioners book within the context of his own book that depicts the Umuofia as complex, sophisticated, and made up of individuals with different passions and viewpoints, Chinua Achebe argues against this Western Christian view of the Igbo as primitives in need of pacification. He makes this case in written language, that permanent language of power, both to the white men and to his own people.


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