

Week 9 (Novel 3)  
Lecture 7 (14 Oct. 25)  
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## Lecture Notes on Chinua Achebe



- **Born:** November 16, 1930, Ogidi, Nigeria
- **Died:** March 21, 2013, Boston, USA

- Achebe was a Nigerian novelist, poet, professor, and critic.
- He is best known for his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which is considered a seminal text in African literature.

- Achebe's works focus on the impact of European colonization on African society and the complex dynamics of traditional African cultures.

### 2. Early Life and Education

- Achebe grew up in British colonial Nigeria during a period when British culture and education were heavily imposed on the Igbo community.
- His father was a Christian teacher, but Achebe was also deeply connected to his Igbo heritage, giving him a dual perspective on colonialism and African tradition.
- He attended the University of Ibadan, where he studied English literature. His academic experiences exposed him to both Western literary traditions and African oral histories.

### 3. Key Themes in Achebe's Works

Achebe's writing often deals with several recurring themes, including:

- **Colonialism:** Achebe critiques the European imperialist project, highlighting how colonization led to the disruption of African societies and traditions. His novels often explore the tension between traditional African values and Western influences.
- **Cultural Conflict:** His works often depict the clash between African and Western cultures, demonstrating the devastating effects of cultural imposition and the erosion of indigenous traditions.
- **Identity and Self-Determination:** Achebe emphasizes the importance of Africans defining their identity on their own terms, rather than being defined by Western stereotypes.
- **Language:** Achebe is a proponent of using Africanized English in literature, as a means of authentically representing African perspectives. He famously said that "African writers write back to the empire," reclaiming their narratives through the language imposed by the colonizers.

### 4. Achebe's Major Works

## 1. Things Fall Apart (1958)

- **Plot Summary:**
  - The novel is set in pre-colonial Nigeria and follows the story of Okonkwo, a respected leader in the Igbo community. It portrays his rise to prominence, his eventual downfall, and the arrival of British colonizers who disrupt the traditional ways of life.
  - The novel's title is a reference to W.B. Yeats' poem *The Second Coming*: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold."
- **Major Themes:**
  - The disintegration of traditional African society under the pressures of colonialism.
  - The conflict between change and tradition, as embodied in Okonkwo's resistance to the changes brought by missionaries and colonial administrators.
  - Masculinity and power, represented through Okonkwo's rigid adherence to patriarchal norms.
  - The tragic hero, as Okonkwo's tragic flaw (hubris and fear of failure) leads to his downfall.
- **Impact:**
  - *Things Fall Apart* is widely regarded as the archetypal modern African novel and is considered a response to European depictions of Africa as "uncivilized" (as seen in works like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*).
  - The novel was groundbreaking in its use of English to convey African realities, blending traditional oral storytelling with Western narrative forms.

## 2. No Longer at Ease (1960)

- **Plot Summary:**
  - This novel follows Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of Okonkwo from *Things Fall Apart*. It examines the challenges Obi faces as a young Nigerian educated in Britain who returns to work for the colonial civil service.
- **Major Themes:**
  - The novel explores the tension between tradition and modernity, as Obi struggles to balance his Western education and values with the expectations of his family and Nigerian society.
  - Corruption and the moral dilemmas of post-colonial Africa are also central themes.

## 3. Arrow of God (1964)

- **Plot Summary:**
  - Set in colonial Nigeria, this novel tells the story of Ezeulu, a chief priest of the god Ulu, and his attempt to preserve his authority and traditional beliefs in the face of colonial pressure.
- **Major Themes:**
  - The conflict between indigenous religious practices and the imposition of Christianity by colonial powers.
  - The idea of fate and individual agency as Ezeulu's choices lead to his downfall, mirroring the themes of tragic heroes from Achebe's other works.

## 4. A Man of the People (1966)

- **Plot Summary:**
  - This novel is a satirical political narrative about post-colonial Nigeria, focusing on the corruption and opportunism of African political leaders in the newly independent nation.
- **Major Themes:**
  - Political corruption, moral decay, and the betrayal of the promises of independence.
  - The novel reflects Achebe's critique of the Nigerian political elite and the challenges faced by African nations after decolonization.

#### 5. *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987)

- **Plot Summary:**
  - The story is set in a fictional West African country and revolves around the lives of three friends who navigate the complexities of dictatorship and political instability.
- **Major Themes:**
  - The novel deals with the abuse of power, the struggle for social justice, and the role of intellectuals in political resistance.
  - Achebe examines the nature of storytelling as a form of resistance, linking back to the oral traditions of African societies.

#### 5. Non-fiction and Essays

Achebe was also an influential essayist, writing on a range of political, cultural, and literary topics.

- **"An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (1977):**
  - In this famous essay, Achebe critiques Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, accusing the novel of dehumanizing Africans and perpetuating racist stereotypes.
  - Achebe argues that Western literature often portrays Africa as a "dark" and "uncivilized" place, reinforcing colonial ideologies.
- **"The Trouble with Nigeria" (1983):**
  - This is a political essay in which Achebe critiques the systemic issues plaguing Nigeria, including corruption, poor leadership, and a lack of national unity. It reflects Achebe's deep engagement with post-colonial politics.

#### 6. Achebe's Contributions to African Literature

- **Founder of Modern African Literature:** Achebe is credited with transforming the image of African literature on the global stage. His works gave voice to African experiences and challenged Western literary conventions that often depicted Africa in a distorted manner.
- **Use of English:** Achebe's decision to write in English was strategic. He believed that in order to reach a global audience and combat colonialist narratives, it was important to use the language of the colonizers, but adapt it to reflect African speech patterns and storytelling techniques.

- **Political Activism:** Throughout his life, Achebe was involved in political movements, particularly during Nigeria's Civil War (1967–1970). His writings reflect his commitment to social justice and the empowerment of African nations.

## 7. Awards and Honors

- **Man Booker International Prize (2007):** Achebe received this prestigious award for his contributions to world literature.
- **Other Awards:** He received numerous honorary doctorates and literary prizes throughout his career, solidifying his legacy as one of the most important African writers.

## 8. Legacy and Influence

- Achebe's works continue to be studied globally, not just in African studies programs but also in courses on post-colonialism, world literature, and cultural studies.
- He paved the way for subsequent generations of African writers, including Wole Soyinka, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and others who have followed in his footsteps to challenge colonial narratives and represent African perspectives.

## 9. Conclusion

Chinua Achebe's contribution to literature and cultural criticism remains profound. Through his novels, essays, and political engagement, Achebe redefined African literature, making it an essential part of the global literary canon. His works offer timeless reflections on colonialism, tradition, and modernity, urging readers to confront the complexities of identity and history in a post-colonial world.

## Lecture Notes on the First Three Chapters of *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe



### 1. Introduction to the Novel

- **Publication:** *Things Fall Apart* was first published in 1958 and is considered one of the most significant works in African literature.
- **Setting:** The novel is set in the late 19th century in a fictional Nigerian village, Umuofia, during the pre-colonial period, just before British colonization began to impact Igbo society.
- **Overview of Themes:**
  - The tension between tradition and change
  - The rise and fall of a tragic hero
  - Masculinity and the fear of weakness
  - The influence of fate and personal choices
  - The effect of colonialism on indigenous cultures

The first three chapters establish the protagonist, Okonkwo, his background, and the societal structure of Umuofia, setting the stage for the conflict between traditional values and external forces of change.

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## 2. Chapter 1: Okonkwo's Introduction and Background

### 2.1. Plot Summary

- **Opening:** The novel opens with a vivid description of Okonkwo, introducing him as a physically strong and renowned man in his village. He is famous for his wrestling victory over Amalinze the Cat, which made him a respected figure at a young age.
- **Characterization of Okonkwo:**
  - Okonkwo is portrayed as a hard-working, successful farmer and warrior who has earned several titles in his community. His personality is defined by his ambition, strength, and deep fear of failure.
  - The contrast between Okonkwo and his father, Unoka, is quickly established. While Okonkwo is celebrated for his achievements, his father was seen as weak, lazy, and irresponsible, having died in debt and left no legacy for his family.

### 2.2. Major Themes Introduced

- **Masculinity and Fear of Weakness:**
  - Okonkwo's intense fear of weakness and failure stems from his father's perceived failures. His desire to distance himself from his father's legacy drives many of his actions throughout the novel.
  - Masculinity in the Igbo society is closely linked to physical strength, material wealth, and social status, all of which Okonkwo pursues to affirm his worth.
- **Tradition and Society:**
  - Achebe introduces Igbo society as one that values personal achievement and hard work. Okonkwo's rise to prominence exemplifies the community's respect for individuals who succeed by adhering to its social norms.
  - The importance of titles, wrestling matches, and the yam crop as a symbol of wealth and manhood begins to establish the cultural setting.

### 2.3. Important Quotes

- "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements" (Ch. 1).
- "He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had had no patience with his father" (Ch. 1).

### 2.4. Analysis of Chapter 1

- Achebe's narrative opens with a character-driven approach, making Okonkwo's inner motivations central to the story. This gives the reader a personal stake in understanding how his actions will unfold.

- The sharp contrast between Okonkwo and his father highlights the novel's exploration of generational conflict and the fear of failure. It also introduces the Igbo community's hierarchical structure, where status is earned through hard work and accomplishment, not inherited wealth or aristocracy.
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### 3. Chapter 2: The Village and the Looming Conflict

#### 3.1. Plot Summary

- **Okonkwo at Home:** The narrative moves from Okonkwo's external successes to his personal life, showing how his ambition and fear of weakness also affect his relationships at home. Okonkwo rules his household with an iron fist, and his wives and children live in fear of his anger.
- **The Village Meeting:** A meeting is called in Umuofia because one of the village's daughters has been murdered in Mbaino, a neighboring village. The village leaders decide to send Okonkwo as an emissary of war to demand retribution or compensation from Mbaino.
- **The Decision of Mbaino:** Mbaino avoids war by offering Umuofia a virgin and a young boy, Ikemefuna, as compensation. The virgin is given to the family of the murdered girl, and Ikemefuna is placed in Okonkwo's household temporarily.

#### 3.2. Major Themes Introduced

- **Justice and Retribution:**
  - The Igbo concept of justice is community-oriented and ritualistic. The killing of a daughter from Umuofia requires the neighboring village to provide compensation in the form of human lives, showing the weight of collective responsibility in Igbo society.
  - The narrative here introduces how inter-village diplomacy operates within a traditional society and how collective security and peace are prioritized over individual conflicts.
- **Okonkwo's Fear and Aggression:**
  - Okonkwo's increasing fear of showing any form of weakness or emotion manifests in his harsh treatment of his family, particularly his wives and children. His authority in the family mirrors the broader patriarchal structure of Igbo society.
- **The Arrival of Ikemefuna:**
  - Ikemefuna's introduction sets up a significant subplot in the novel. His presence in Okonkwo's household will become an emotional turning point for the protagonist later in the novel.

#### 3.3. Important Quotes

- "Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper" (Ch. 2).
- "Umuofia was feared by all its neighbors. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country" (Ch. 2).

### 3.4. Analysis of Chapter 2

- Achebe presents the reader with a glimpse into the strict, patriarchal family structure within Umuofia, showing how Okonkwo's personal insecurities affect not just his public persona but his private relationships as well.
  - The village's response to the murder of one of its members demonstrates the societal emphasis on communal honor and justice, with reparation and ritual maintaining social equilibrium.
  - The looming tension between traditional practices and external forces (symbolized by the arrival of Ikemefuna) subtly hints at the greater conflicts that will arise later in the novel.
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## 4. Chapter 3: Okonkwo's Struggle and the Importance of Yams

### 4.1. Plot Summary

- **Unoka's Failure:** This chapter provides more background on Okonkwo's father, Unoka, and his inability to succeed within the traditional Igbo system. Unoka is portrayed as a man who detests war, loves music, and is poor at farming. His lack of success has a deep effect on Okonkwo.
- **Okonkwo's Youth:** Despite being born into poverty, Okonkwo's determination and hard work led him to borrow yam seeds from a wealthy man named Nwakibie. This was a major step, as yams are seen as the primary measure of a man's wealth and status in Umuofia.
- **The Struggle to Grow Yams:** Okonkwo works tirelessly, but his early attempts to grow yams are thwarted by bad weather and a terrible drought. This section reveals Okonkwo's perseverance in the face of adversity and his refusal to accept failure, despite the challenges.

### 4.2. Major Themes Introduced

- **Fate vs. Personal Effort:**
  - The Igbo believe in both personal agency and the role of fate. Unoka's failures are attributed partly to fate, but Okonkwo refuses to accept fate as an excuse for his situation.
  - Okonkwo's success is thus seen as a direct result of his hard work and willpower, but Achebe subtly suggests that external forces—such as the drought—can still limit one's success.
- **Agriculture as Power:**
  - Yams are a symbol of wealth, masculinity, and status in Umuofia. A man's ability to farm yams successfully determines his social standing, and this agricultural metaphor underpins much of the novel's exploration of power dynamics.
  - The struggle to cultivate yams also symbolizes the difficulties of life and the importance of resilience in overcoming obstacles.
- **Contrast Between Okonkwo and Unoka:**
  - Achebe deepens the contrast between Okonkwo and his father by showing Okonkwo's determination to succeed where his father failed. Okonkwo's

entire identity is shaped by his desire to escape the shame and poverty that he associates with his father's legacy.

#### 4.3. Important Quotes

- “He [Unoka] was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat... he was a failure” (Ch. 3).
- “He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams” (Ch. 3).

#### 4.4. Analysis of Chapter 3

- This chapter reveals more about the symbolic role of yams in Igbo culture, linking them to ideas of masculinity, power, and wealth. Okonkwo's struggle to grow yams despite difficult conditions mirrors his broader struggle to overcome the stigma of his father's failure.
  - Achebe uses Unoka as a foil to Okonkwo, reinforcing the latter's fear of weakness and failure. At the same time, Okonkwo's extreme reaction to his father's shortcomings suggests that his rigid outlook might also lead to his downfall.
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### 5. Conclusion: Establishing the Protagonist and Cultural Context

- The first three chapters of *Things Fall Apart* set up the fundamental conflict that drives the novel: Okonkwo's fear of failure and weakness, and his determination to succeed within a highly structured, patriarchal society.
- Achebe introduces the readers to the central themes of masculinity, tradition, fate, and justice, while embedding these themes within the specific cultural practices of the Igbo community.
- The chapters also foreshadow the larger narrative arc, hinting at Okonkwo's tragic flaw—his inability to adapt or compromise—which will ultimately lead to his undoing.