Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Things Fall Apart

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Plot

- Part One: Umuofia, a group of **Igbo** villages in Nigeria, in the late 1800s. Okonkwo is a famous wrestler and a successful farmer, driven by fear of being like his lazy, debt-ridden father Unoka. He has three wives and several children, including his son Nwoye and his favourite daughter Ezinma.
- Ikemefuna, a boy given to Umuofia to settle a dispute, lives with Okonkwo's family for three years and becomes like a brother to Nwoye. When the Oracle decrees that he must die, Okonkwo strikes the fatal blow because he is afraid of looking weak.
- Part Two: Okonkwo's gun explodes at a funeral and kills a boy by accident, so he is exiled for seven years to his mother's village. Christian missionaries arrive, and Nwoye joins them.
- Part Three: Okonkwo returns to find the church and a colonial government in Umuofia. After a convert unmasks an ancestral spirit, the clansmen burn the church, and their leaders are arrested and humiliated. Okonkwo kills a messenger, but no one fights with him, and he hangs himself.

Characters

- Okonkwo: brave and hard-working, but his fear of weakness makes him violent and unable to change. He is a **tragic hero**.
- Nwoye: gentle and troubled by the killing of Ikemefuna and the clan's traditions; Christianity attracts him.
- Unoka: Okonkwo's father, a flute player who loved music and conversation but never repaid his debts.
- Mr Brown: a missionary who tries to understand **Igbo** beliefs. Reverend Smith: his strict replacement, who causes conflict. The District Commissioner plans to write only a paragraph about Okonkwo in a book about "pacifying" the tribes.

Themes and context

- Masculinity and fear of failure, tradition and change, religion, **colonialism**, fate (a person's "chi", or personal god) and the clash of cultures.
- Chinua Achebe published the novel in 1958, two years before Nigeria's independence from Britain. He wanted to show **Igbo** society as complex and full of meaning, in reply to European books that showed Africa as savage.
- The title comes from W B Yeats's poem The Second Coming, about the world falling into chaos.

Form and style

- Achebe writes in English but includes **Igbo** words, **proverbs** and folk tales, so the reader enters the culture.
- The structure moves from a detailed picture of **Igbo** life to its sudden break-up when the colonisers arrive. The final pages switch to the District Commissioner's cold view, showing how Europeans would tell the story.

Key terms

Igbo	The people and language of south-eastern Nigeria.
Colonialism	One country taking control of another and its people.
Tragic hero	A great character whose flaw leads to his downfall.
Proverb	A short, traditional saying that gives advice or expresses a truth.
Chi	In Igbo belief, a person's personal god or spirit.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Where is Things Fall Apart set?
2. What is Okonkwo most afraid of?
3. Who was Okonkwo's father?
4. Why does Okonkwo kill Ikemefuna himself?
5. Why is Okonkwo exiled for seven years?
6. Which of Okonkwo's children becomes a Christian?
7. Which missionary tries to understand Igbo beliefs?
8. How does the novel end?

Answers

1. Umuofia, among the Igbo people of Nigeria
2. Being weak like his father
3. Unoka
4. He is afraid of looking weak

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5. His gun accidentally kills a boy at a funeral
6. Nwoye
7. Mr Brown
8. Okonkwo hangs himself

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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