Things Fall Apart

Part One

Chapter One

1. Reread the first sentence of the novel. What purposes does this sentence serve?

2. Explain the rhetorical strategies used in the first two paragraphs.

3. Explain the use of figurative devices in the following line: “Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water.”

4. Explain the imagery in the following line: “That was many years ago, twenty years or more, and during this time Okonkwo’s fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan.”

5. What is the rhetorical effect used in the following line: “The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath.” What effect does it create?

6. Describe Okonkwo. Why does Achebe use animal imagery to describe him?

7. Describe Unoka. How does Okonkwo feel about his father?

8. Why does Achebe spend so much of the first part of the chapter describing Unoka?

9. How does Okonkwo’s impression of his father shape Okonkwo’s character? How does he act as a result of his father’s reputation?

10. Explain the importance of the following line: “Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.”

11. What does the reader learn about how Okonkwo feels about his father?

12. How does the text refer to Ikemefuna?

13. What do these references indicate about Ikemefuna?

14. Explain the purpose(s) of the first chapter?

Chapter Two

1. How do the villages communicate with each other?

2. What are the italicized words included in the text? What is the purpose of including these words in the narrative?

3. What does Okonkwo realize after the town crier comes through town?

4. How do the people feel about night? How do they eliminate or deal with fear?

5. Explain the meaning of the following saying: “When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk.”

6. How does Okonkwo feel about war? Why do you think he feels this way?

7. Explain the purpose of the following line as it relates to characterization: “On great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank his palm-wine from his first human head.” Why would Achebe mention such an act in this novel?

8. Describe the nature of the conflict between the villages, Mbaino and Umuofia.

9. How do other tribes feel about Umuofia?

10. How does Umuofia choose to settle the dispute? Why do they make this decision? Provide textual evidence to support your answer.

11. What does the discussion indicate about the nature of medicine and religion in the Ibo tribe?

12. Why is Okonkwo chosen to visit Mbaino?

13. Why does the reader suspect that something is going to happen with Ikemefuna and Okonkwo?

14. Describe the family structure of Okonkwo’s tribe.

15. How would Okonkwo’s rule of his household be interpreted in Western culture?

16. Why does Okonkwo treat his family the way he does? How does Achebe want the reader to feel about Okonkwo? 17. What rhetorical techniques does Achebe use in the following line: “It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw”? What effect is being achieved?

18. Achebe informs the reader that there is a word that means both “woman” and “a man who had taken no title.” Why does he share this information with the reader?

19. Who is Nwoye? How does Okonkwo feel about him?

20. Is Okonkwo’s description of Nwoye accurate? How do we know?

21. Reread the exchange between Okonkwo and his “most senior” wife. How does Okonkwo treat her? What does it demonstrate about the role of gender within the Ibo community?

22. Describe the compound where Okonkwo and his family live. What does this tell the reader about Okonkwo?

Chapter Three

1. What effect does Achebe achieve with his repetition of the phrase “they came” in the second paragraph?

2. Why must people crawl when visiting Agbala?

3. Why might it be unusual that a woman is the one who serves and can see Agbala?

4. When Okonkwo’s father visits the oracle, what does he learn?

5. What is a chi? How is it important in the story?

6. Why is Unoka left to die in the Evil Forest?

7. Reread the first part of this chapter and the last paragraph before the break. Why does Achebe begin and end this section with the same information? What is he repeating?

8. Who is Nwakibie? How does the reader know that he is successful?

9. What does Nwakibie mean when he says, “You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break”?

10. What is the meaning of the following: “…an old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb”? How does this relate to Okonkwo?

11. Why does Nwakibie agree to let Okonkwo use his yams for share-cropping?

12. Why does Okonkwo resent having to take care of his mother and sisters?

13. Explain the sarcasm in the paragraph about the unearned success of the farmers who delayed planting their yams.

14. Analyze the several literary techniques used in this chapter.

Chapter Four

1. How was Okonkwo able to achieve such a high rank within the tribe when his father died a penniless man? How is this different from colonial-era European culture?

2. What suggestion is there that Okonkwo will evolve into a tragic hero?

3. Why is the old man’s rebuke significant?

4. The text mentions the chi again as it relates to Okonkwo’s success. How strong a determiner is the chi assumed to be?

5. Why does the text return to the story of Ikemefuna after spending time discussing the traditions with the harvest?

6. Describe Ikemefuna. How does he fit into the family structure?

7. What is significant about Okwonko’s breaking the peace during the Week of Peace? What does this action indicate about Okonkwo?

8. In this chapter, what does the reader learn about the customs of the Ibo and the customs of other neighboring clans? How might this be important in the story?

9. How does Okonkwo respond to his son? What verb does Achebe use to suggest that Okonkwo’s perception of his son is not necessarily accurate?

10. Why does Achebe end this chapter by relating the nature of the relationship between Ikemefuna and Nwoye?

Chapter Five

1. Achebe begins Chapter Five by describing the Feast of the New Yam. What does the reader learn about Umuofian culture through this description?

2. Who is responsible for the major preparations for the Feast of the New Yam? What does this tell the reader about Ibo culture?

3. Why does Okonkwo become angry before the New Yam Festival? Was his anger directed in the right place? Why or why not?

4. For what reason does Achebe repeat the word “beautiful” when describing the way the women decorate their bodies and cut their children’s hair into patterns?

5. What is Ekwefi’s favorite part of the festival? Why?

6. When people call for one another, why do they respond “Is that me?”

7. What type of relationship has Ikemefuna developed with Okonkwo’s family? Cite an instance in this chapter that demonstrates this relationship.

8. What is the significance of the extended metaphor Achebe uses to describe the drums and their relationship to the village?

9. When Okonkwo’s wives bring him his food for the evening, Ezinma sits with her father while she waits for him to finish her mother’s dish. Why does Okonkwo yell at her?

Chapter Six

1. What is significant about the number of drums used at the wrestling?

2. What do Okonkwo’s springing to his feet and then sitting immediately imply?

3. Explain the literary device Achebe uses in the following line:

“The air, which had been stretched taut with excitement, relaxed again.”

4. Who is Chielo?

5. Discuss the type of language that Achebe uses to describe the fight and how this might add to the importance of this scene.

Chapter Seven

1. At the beginning of this chapter, the narrator states: “He grew rapidly like a yam tendril in the rainy season, and was full of the sap of life.” Of whom is he speaking? What does this image indicate about this person?

2. How does Okonkwo feel about Ikemefuna and the relationship that he has developed with his Nwoye?

3. What line in the first page of the chapter would indicate that Nwoye is only acting in a certain way in order to appease his father?

4. Consider the following lines and discuss whether or not you think they are the way everyone in Umuofia feels or just the way Okonkwo feels.

“And so he was always happy when he heard him grumbling about his women. That showed that in time he would be able to control his women-folk. No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man.”

5. How does Okonkwo define manliness?

6. Why does Achebe spends so much time setting up the dichotomy between Okonkwo and Nwoye?

7. Achebe includes one of the stories that Nwoye likes to hear his mother tell. Why does this story appear here?

8. What type of imagery does Achebe use to describe the arrival of the locusts? What is significant about this passage?

 Achebe describes the arrival as follows:

“At first, a fairly small swarm came. They were the harbingers sent to survey the land. And then appeared on the horizon a slowly-moving mass like a boundless sheet of black cloud drifting towards Umuofia. Soon it covered half the sky and the solid mass was now broken by tiny eyes of light like shining star dust. It was a tremendous sight, full of power and beauty.”

9. Why do the village elders decide that Ikemefuna is to be killed?

10. How does the clan strike an apparent harmony between the will of the Community and the needs of the Individual?

11. Why does Okonkwo dress to go with the men who are taking Ikemefuna instead of staying removed from the business as he is told?

12. How does Achebe change the setting to complement what is happening in the story?

13. How does Okonkwo once again place his own fears above the good of his community?

14. What is the purpose of Nwoye’s point of view?

15. What two themes have been identified by the end of Chapter 7?

Chapter Eight

1. What does the reader learn about Okonkwo from the following passage:

“Okonkwo did not taste any food for two days after the death of Ikemefuna. He drank palm-wine from morning till night, and his eyes were red and fierce like the eyes of a rat when it was caught by the tail and dashed against the floor.”

2. Again Okonkwo mentions that Ezinma should have been a boy. Why is it important that he mentions this at this point in the story?

3. What theme is advanced by the following passage?

“When did you become a shivering old woman,” Okonkwo asked himself, “you, who are known in all the nine villages for your valor in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed.”

4. How does the reader know that Okonkwo is worried, not only about the future of his family, but also the future of the village?

5. What does Obierika believe about Okonkwo’s decision to help carry out Ikemefuna’s death? What might this foreshadow?

6. Achebe spends some time developing the story of Ozoemena and Ndulue. What is the purpose of this story? What does it illustrate about the differences in the way of thinking between Okonkwo and Obierika, but also about the village as a whole?

7. How could the following statementfunction as foreshadowing in the novel?

“Okonkwo was not a man of thought but of action.”

8. How does this chapter establish that things are changing within the village?

9. How are white people introduced in this chapter? What is the tone of the chapter at the time they are introduced?

Chapter Nine

1. What is an ogbanje and how does it relate to Ezinma’s illness?

2. How does Okonkwo’s helplessness manifest itself?

Chapter Ten

1. Explain the disconnect between the chapters. Why would Achebe choose to do this?

2. Read the following lines:

“It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders.”

 What does this excerpt suggest about the role of women? What is significant about the placement of this passage relative to what has come immediately before, and what will come immediately after?

3. Explain the irony of the trial in this chapter. Is justice served in the egwugwu’s judgment?

4. How does the case brought before the egwugwu parallel Okonkwo’s life?

Chapter Eleven

1. Often, the setting is not just “where the story happens,” but a geographical, historical, social, economic, or philosophical setting. Achebe begins this chapter with a description of the night. The reader learns earlier in the novel the significance the night has for people. What purpose does the setting serve at the beginning of this chapter?

2. This chapter focuses on Ibo folklore. Summarize the story of the tortoise and the birds and explain what it suggests about customs and traditions. How might this story relate to Okonkwo?

3. How does the story of the tortoise and the birds relate to colonialism?

4. What type of imagery does Achebe use to describe Ekwefi’s reaction to hearing her daughter’s name? Find similar language in the chapter that parallels this.

5. Why does Chielo visit Okonkwo and Ekwefi?

6. How does Ekwefi go against the wishes of Chielo?

7. Describe the rhetorical technique that Achebe uses in the paragraph that begins, “The priestess’ voice was already growing faint in the distance.” Why does Achebe use this technique?

8. Explain the irony in the situation that it begins to grow lighter as Ekwefi is still following Chielo.

9. How does Achebe maintain the tone of the chapter and the significance of Chielo’s power when the priestess reaches the circular ring of hills? How might a western reader interpret this section?

10. Who joins Ekwefi at the cave, and how does this contribute to his character development? Does this conflict with what we know about this character thus far?

11. How does Ekwefi’s decision to follow Chielo contradict Okonkwo’s ideas about femininity and masculinity?

Chapter Twelve

1. Analyze Okonkwo’s feelings about what happened with Chielo. How is his response different from the way that Ekwefi views the situation?

2. On what type of ceremony does this chapter focus? How is this ceremony different from the other ceremonies that have been discussed in the book?

Chapter Thirteen

1. What happens that causes the cannons to boom? What does Okonkwo remember in relation to this event?

2. Why does Achebe include a funeral ceremony at this point in the novel?

3. What does the one-handed spirit’s benediction ironically foreshadow?

4. What is the significance of this death’s occurring at the center of the novel?

5. How is the accidental killing punished by Okwonko’s clan? How does Okonkwo face his punishment? How do the village elders handle his punishment?

6. How does Obierika react to the punishment? Why do you think he reacts this way? What does he resolve after his contemplation? How does this resolution advance one of the themes of the novel?

7. How might the village interpret Okonkwo’s role in the death? What had Obierka warned Okonkwo about his role in Ikemefuna’s death?

8. How does Achebe create dramatic tension in this chapter? What purpose does the shooting serve?

9. Explain the irony in Okonkwo’s having to return to the motherland and that he committed the “female” crime.

10. What might Obierika’s final statement foreshadow?

“As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others.”

Part Two

Chapter Fourteen

1. What does Okonkwo learn about family in his transition to life in Mbanta?

2. Cite several literary devices that Achebe uses when describing nature after the first rains and analyze the effect Achebe creates with their use.

3. How does Okonkwo compare beginning life as an older person to beginning life as a young man?

4. Why is Okonkwo unable to deal with his punishment? How does he seem to be behaving by sitting in “a silent half-sleep”?

5. Explain the significance of being “cast out of his clan like a fish onto a dry, sandy beach, panting.”

6. What does Okonkwo find discouraging about his chi?

7. What does Uchendu try to teach Okonkwo about the role of women?

8. What might Uchendu’s lecture portend for Okonkwo and foreshadow for the plot?

Chapter Fifteen

1. What is the purpose of Obierka’s visit?

2. How do Obierika and Okonkwo greet Uchendu when they come to visit him?

3. What news does Obierika bring to Okonkwo?

4. What did the Oracle mean when it told the Abame that the white men were locusts?

5. To what do Obierka, Uchendu, and Okonkwo liken the arrival of the white men in Abame?

6. How does Achebe conclude the chapter? Why is this significant?

Chapter Sixteen

1. How do the clan leaders feel about the white men’s religion? Why?

2. In what ways is Nwoye’s being with the missionaries significant?

3. How are Nwoye and Okonkwo revealed to be more similar than different?

4. What imagery does Achebe use to illustrate how Nwoye felt after hearing the missionary’s message?

5. Why does Achebe create a situation in which the missionaries cannot speak the African language?

Chapter Seventeen

1. What do the missionaries ask of the village? What do the leaders of the village grant the men? How does this backfire?

2. What prevents Nwoye from attending church the first Sunday it is open? What does this illustrate about the power of superstition?

3. Whom do the missionaries allow to join their church? What is unusual about this?

4. How does Okonkwo react when he learns that Nwoye has been at the church? Why do he and Nwoye no longer talk?

5. At the end of the chapter, what metaphor does Achebe use to illustrate Okonkwo’s belief about his son?

Chapter Eighteen

1. What does the narrator suggest has arrived along with the new religion?

2. Why do the missionaries insist that the outcasts shave their heads?

3. Part two of the novel relates much of what happens to the clan as a unit rather than just to Okonkwo. How does the reader know that Okonkwo is still the same man who came to the village after being banned from his fatherland?

4. In what two, almost contradictory, ways is Okoli’s death significant?

Chapter Nineteen

1. What do we learn about Okonkwo in the opening paragraphs of this chapter?

2. What do the names of the children that are born to Okonkwo during his exile symbolize about how he really feels about living in his motherland? How do the names of his children illustrate Okonkwo’s personality?

3. Explain the significance of the final speech in the chapter. What does it foreshadow for Part Three of the novel?

Chapter Twenty

1. The first part of the novel focuses on Okonkwo and how he rises to prominence in his society. The first part also details customs and traditions among the people. The second part of the novel depicts Okonkwo’s exile, and the beginning of both his decline and the potential decline of Ibo culture. Chapter Twenty is the beginning of Part Three. What do you think Part Three will be about?

2. Explain the meaning of the following simile: “The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another.”

3. What effect does Achebe achieve with his use of anaphora in the first page of this chapter?

4. Why is it ironic that Okonkwo now blames his chi for his losses, especially the “tragedy of his first son”?

5. Why, according to Obierka, did the village not resist the white man’s initial encroachment? Why won’t he agree to fight now that Okonkwo has returned?

6. Explain the significance of the following line: “He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”

7. Okonkwo and Obierika seem to disagree a great deal throughout the novel. What does each person represent?

Chapter Twenty-One

1. What turns out to be the real underlying reason for the white man’s success in Umuofia?

2. Explain Mr. Brown’s method of conversion and why he is successful.

3. How does Umuofia respond to Okonkwo’s return? Why?

4. What does Mr. Brown’s visit to Okonkwo emphasize about relations between the Ibo and the Europeans?

5. How is the theme of the novel repeated in the last paragraph of this chapter?

Chapter Twenty-Two

1. How does Mr. Smith’s arrival portend trouble for the clan?

2. How does Enoch create the conflict between the church and the clan? How was this event foreshadowed earlier in the novel?

3. Explain the importance of the following line: “It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming—its own death.”

4. How are Enoch and Okonkwo similar?

5. What is the inevitable result of Mr. Smith’s inability to understand and communicate?

Chapter Twenty-Three

1. What do the first two paragraphs of this chapter suggest are the reasons that Okonkwo begins to feel happy again?

2. How does the District Commissioner break faith with the leaders of Umuofia?

3. What punishment does the District Commissioner impose on the men? What is the men’s reaction?

4. How are the men treated in the jail that is in opposition to what the District Commissioner tells the guards to do?

5. What simile does Achebe use to describe the village’s alarm and confusion? Why is this significant?

6. How is village life portrayed as already ended?

Chapter Twenty-Four

1. What kind of opportunity would a war offer to Okonkwo?

2. Based on what we already know about Okwonko’s character, what does his insistence on war foreshadow?

3. Reread the exchange between Obierika and Okonkwo. How does it reflect the characteristics of both men? What does it foreshadow for Okonkwo?

4. How does Okonkwo’s statement about not caring what the group does predict his fall as a tragic hero?

5. In what ways is Okonkwo’s slaughter of the head messenger climactic?

Chapter Twenty-Five

1. Why has Okonkwo commited suicide?

2. Given his role as the tragic hero in the novel, is it inevitable that Okonkwo commit suicide?

3. On what kind of note does the novel end?