

Things Fall Apart Study Guide

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe

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Plot Summary

The tragic story of the life of warrior Okonkwo is the focus of the story "Things Fall Apart" by Chinua Achebe. Although Okonkwo strives to overcome his father's reputation as a sluggard who refuses to pay his debts, his life ends almost as tragically as his father's as he commits suicide, the ultimate crime for the African community in which he lives. Okonkwo's story plays out against a backdrop of change in this culture, Christianity has come into the village which once was the pride of Okonkwo because of its reputation for war and strength. The characteristics that Okonkwo once strived to have are no longer as prized as they once were. Okonkwo is left feeling betrayed by his village, as if everything he has worked to have means nothing.

Okonkwo's goal in his life is to be a leader in his village. He works hard to build himself a farm and successful yam crops. His family becomes respected despite his father's legacy. An accident where Okonkwo's gun explodes, causing the death of a teen boy, makes Okonkwo and his family seek refuge in his mother's homeland. His farm, barns, and crops are destroyed as is the custom of the people. Although his mother's people greet him warmly and are good to him, Okonkwo is not happy because all that he has worked for is gone.

When Okonkwo finishes his required seven years in his mother's homeland, he returns home, but things have changed. Missionaries have come into the village. Okonkwo's son is one of the village members who has been swayed by the promises of this religion. The missionaries, along with politicians, meddle in the traditions of the village, angering Okonkwo. Okonkwo sees more and more signs that his village is not the village of warriors that it once was. When he sees that the other men refuse to stand against the missionaries and politicians, he kills himself.



Part 1 Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter One

At age eighteen Okonkwo has earned fame for himself by beating Amalinze the Cat in a wrestling match. For seven years Amalinze had gone unbeaten. Now, at thirty-eight, Okonkwo is huge and severe looking with a slight stammer and a quick fist when angry. He has no patience for unsuccessful men or for his father. Although his father had died ten years earlier, Okonkwo is still trying to outlive the shame he felt at being the son of a lazy debtor. Unoka enjoyed music, feasting and playing his flute. Unoka is poor. His wives and children, including Okonkwo, barely have enough to eat.

Okonkwo is lucky because the people of his time judge him not by his father's reputation, but by the reputation of his own hard work. He is already wealthy with two barns of yams and three wives. Since the people respect Okonkwo, he is given the job of looking after Ikemefuna, a boy given to their town in an agreement to stop a war.

Chapter Two

Okonkwo has just gone to bed when he hears the town crier calling all the men to meet in the town market the next morning. At the meeting, Ogbuefi Ezeugo tells the men that the men of Mbaino had murdered a woman from their town when she went to market in Mbaino. The people of Mbaino are told they must either give a virgin and a young boy as payment for the murder or must face war. Okonkwo is sent as the emissary to Mbaino to bring back a boy about the age of fifteen and a virgin. The girl is given to Ogbuefi Udo to take the place of his murdered wife. The boy, however, was sent to live with Okonkwo until the people of the village decided his fate. He lived with Okonkwo for three years.

More than anything, Okonkwo hates the things that his father represented to him. He worries because he sees the same laziness that his father had in his oldest son. It is Nwoye's mother who is given charge of Ikemefuna. The boy does not know why he was taken from his mother. He knows only that he and a girl were taken from the village. He never sees the girl again.

Analysis

Most important in this section of the novel is Okonkwo's deep desire to be nothing like his father. His father was lazy and enjoyed his rest and music. He had refused to pay back those whom he had borrowed money from him. Okonkwo resents these characteristics in his son just as he resented them in his father.



The laws of the land are also introduced in this section of the novel. The men of Mbaina have killed a woman from their village. In their laws, the people of Okonkwo's village take a virgin girl and young boy as payment for the murder. It is not indicated what will happen to the girl, but the boy Ikemefuna is given into Okonkwo's care because the people of the town trust and respect him.

The daily proverbs and rituals that the people of the Nigeria village follow are also interesting. The kola nut seems to be a very important part of the Nigerian village. When visiting, it seems to be a matter of good manners for the visitor to bring a kola nut to share with the person he is visiting. The two will often bicker politely over who should break the nut. It is said that the person who brings a kola nut brings life with them.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Okonkwo hate his father so much?

Discussion Question 2

How does Ikemefuna wind up in Okonkwo's care?

Discussion Question 3

Describe Okonkwo.

Vocabulary

improvident, haggard, impending, intricate, skirting, perpendicular, amiss, discerned, orator, gnashed, ultimatum, compensation, perpetual, capricious, malevolent, incipient, prosperously



Part 1 Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter Three

In Chapter Three, Okonkwo's father had gone to consult Agbala, the priestess, about his crop always being bad. The priestess tells Unoka that he has offended no one but that he should go home and work like a man. It is said that Unoka had a bad personal Chi as he died of swelling. He was not even allowed to die at home. Instead, he was left in the Evil Forrest to die. Since his father had been so lazy, Okonkwo did not have a good start in life. He is forced to go to Nwakibie to beg for yam plants to start his first crop. Although Nwakibie is not the person who would give help to anyone who asks, he agrees to help Okonkwo. He gives him eight hundred yams.

Working as a share-cropper was hard for Okonkwo. He tried not only to build up a barn of his own, but also to take care of his mother and sisters. The weather is horrible the first year that Okonkwo tries to farm. He is surprised that he survives this first year but vows that since he did survive that year he can survive anything.

Chapter Four

In Chapter Four, although the men of Okonkwo's tribe admire him for his hard work and quick rise to prosperity, they are unhappy with the way that he treats men who are not as industrious as he is. The men of the village take sides with Osugo when Okonkwo calls him a woman until Okonkwo apologizes. It is, however, Okonkwo's sternness that makes the people of his village send him to ask for the virgin and the young man from Umuofia. It is also this reason why Okonkwo is given Ikemefuna to care for. He lives with Okonkwo for three years. During this time Ikemefuna loses his fear of Okonkwo and begins to refer to him as father. Ikemefuna and Nwoye become inseparable.

It is also during this first year that Okonkwo breaks the peace during the Week of Peace and is punished by the priest of the earth goddess. Okonkwo beats one of his wives after she does not get home in time to fix his supper. The older men in Okonkwo's tribe talk about how lenient the punishment for breaking the Week of Peace has become. After the Week of Peace, Okonkwo begins to roughly teach his boys how to split and plant yams. Despite Okonkwo's roughness, Ikemefuna begins to feel like part of the family.

Analysis

More is learned about Okonkwo and his father, Unoka, in these chapters. Unoka is so lazy the priestess even tells him that he needs to go home and work like a man. Unoka asks her why his crops are always bad. It was a belief that if a person had wronged another, it would cause them to have bad luck. As Unoka also died from swelling, a



disease which is considered to be a disgraceful way of dying, the people of the village decided he had a bad chi. Not only does Unoka's laziness affect his own life, it also gets Okonkwo off to a bad start in life. Unlike other young men, Okonkwo's father has built up no riches to pass along to his son. Okonkwo is forced to go and beg to get a start in yam farming. He is lucky as the man who he approaches admires him and gives him twice the number of plants for which he asks.

Although Okonkwo is not lazy, he is not free of shortcomings. Okonkwo's main character flaw is his quick temper. He gets in trouble for his temper when he beats one of his wives during the sacred week of peace. Although the men of the village agree that Okonkwo was justified in his anger, they cannot let his behavior go without the predetermined punishment. Okonkwo also has the reputation of being short tempered and brusque with the people of the village, a characteristic that mars his reputation though many people admire him for his hard work.

Okonkwo has one son. This son is a vexation to Okonkwo as he reminds him of his father. The boy is lazy and shows no promise of maturing into the man that his father wants him to be. Things change when Ikemefuna is put in Okonkwo's care. He and Nwoye become inseparable. Okonkwo sees Nwoye trying to succeed in the things he teaches to both of the boys. Along with Nwoye's improvement, Ikemefuna begins to feel like he is part of Okonkwo's family.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ikemefuna become part of Okonkwo's family?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that Okonkwo is punished for his outburst of anger during the week of peace?

Discussion Question 3

How does Unoka's laziness cause Okonkwo to have a bad start in life?

Vocabulary

dogged, beheld, void, abomination, malicious, dregs, meagre, fending, consolation, brusqueness, benevolent, justifiable, plait, cowries, deftly, dynamism, arduous, poignant



Part 1 Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter Five

In Chapter Five, the people of Umuofia are preparing for the Feast of the New Yam. Okonkwo does not like the sitting around associated with feasts. He would rather be working. He becomes angry because of the inactivity. He voices his anger when he sees a banana tree a few leaves has been removed from and demands to know who killed the tree. The wife who had taken the leaves tells him she took the leaves the wrap some food in and points out that the tree is still alive. Okonkwo beats her. He decides to go hunting. The beaten wife says something about his gun and Okonkwo runs after her and shoots the gun at her. She is frightened but unhurt. The rest of the festival goes well.

The wife who had been shot at enjoys the festival, especially the wrestling match because it was during Okonkwo's wrestling match with the Cat that he had won her heart. She did not marry him because he was poor at the time but later ran away from her husband to live with him. This wife, Ekwefi, has one daughter, Ezinma, who is wise beyond her years. As Ezinma helps her mother and the other wives, the drums begin to beat to announce the competition. As they cook their food quickly so they won't be late, they hear Obiaeli crying outside. One of the younger boys wants to tell the real story of how the pot broke but Ikemefuna stops them. The girl had actually laughed when her pot broke and only began crying when they entered the compound. When Ezinma takes her father his food the two have a talk. Okonkwo is very fond of Ezinma, though he rarely shows his affection.

Chapter Six

In Chapter Six, the wrestling matches and the crowd's response to them are described. For a short while, Ekwefi talks to Chielo about Ezinma. Ekwefi tells Chielo her daughter is now ten and is doing well. Chielo indicates she believes the girl will stay as she has reached that age.

Analysis

One of the interesting things about this novel is the glance that it gives into the lives of this Nigeria tribe. In Chapter Five, the Feast of the New Yam is described, a great celebration for the new harvest that includes much eating, wrestling matches and lots of guests. Certain rituals are followed as the people offer the first yams of their crops to the gods and goddesses. The women scrub and clean all of their cooking utensils and even their houses. They decorate themselves with special symbols and paints. Ukonkwo enjoys the eating and is in a good mood for the festivities but he would rather work that sit around as is prescribed by the festival protocol. The irritation that he feels build in



him and he lashes out at his family for a banana tree that he feels has not been cared for properly. Okonkwo winds up shooting at one of his wives because of this incident.

Another aspect of this portion of the story that deals with the lore believed by the people of this village involves one of Okonkwo's wives and children. Although it is unsure at this point in the novel the story behind the child, the priestess asks about the daughter during the wrestling match. She tells the mother that she believes the child has come to stay. It appears that for some reason, there was question of whether or not the child would live. Ezinma appears to be a special child as the priestess refers to her as "my daughter." Okonkwo also shares a close relationship with the child and wishes that she were a boy.

Also in this section the story is told of Okonkwo's marriage to Ekwfi. Ekwfi had first been married to another man because Okonkwo was not rich enough for her to marry. However, Okonkwo had caught Ekwfi's eye when he won a wrestling match. When Ekwfi learns how violent her first husband is, she runs away to live with Okonkwo because she cannot live with her first husband any longer. There is never any wedding ceremony between the two that is described in the story, Okonkwo just takes Ekwfi into his tent and has sex with her.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the relationship between Okonkwo and Ezinma.

Discussion Question 2

What are the people celebrating during the feast of yams?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Okonkwo shoot at one of his wives with a gun?

Vocabulary

deity, communion, fibrous, reveled, prowess, pottage, consoled, feverishly, intoxicating, taut



Part 1 Chapters 7-8

Summary

Chapter Seven

In Chapter Seven, Ikemefuna has become part of Okonkwo's family in the three years that he has lived with them. The boy has started a desire in Nwoye to be masculine, like Okonkwo. Okonkwo is proud of his son for this new desire. Although Nwoye knows that he is supposed to sit with his father and hear the stories that he tells about violence and bloodshed, he misses the stories that his mother used to tell him.

The locusts come this year. Okonkwo, Nwoye, and Ikemefuna see these creatures headed for their village while they are putting new palm branches and palm leaves on the outer walls of their compound. The people are happy the locusts are coming because the insects are good to eat. One night as Okonkwo is feasting on the locusts with Nwoye and Ikemefuna, Ogbuefi Ezeudu comes to him and warns him not to help in the boy's coming death. Okonkwo lies and tells Ikemefuna that he will be taken back to his former home. Ikemefuna senses that he will not see his mother and sister again as he has been promised.

It is as Ikemefuna is thinking about seeing his mother again that he stops and looks back at the men. One of them tells him to look forward. He hears the blow of the machete, cries that he has been killed, and runs toward Okonkwo. Not wanting to be thought weak, Okonkwo finishes killing the boy. When Okonkwo returns home, Nwoye knows that Ikemefuna is dead. He feels the same way that he felt when he first heard the cries of twin infants that had been thrown away.

Chapter Eight

In Chapter Eight, Okonkwo does not eat nor does he sleep at night after Ikemefuna's death. He will only drink palm wine. On the third day, Ezinma brings him roasted plantains and tell him he has to eat them. As he eats, he thinks that Ezinma should have been a boy. He thinks briefly about Ikemefuna and wishes that he had some work to do to take his mind off the boy.

He visits his friend Obierika and shares with him his concerns about Nwoye's weakness. He worries that his sons will not grow up to be like him. Obierika tells him that he is worrying too soon as the boy is still young. Although both the men think that Nwoye has too much of his grandfather in him, neither puts voice to the thoughts. Okonkwo questions why Obierika did not come with them to kill the boy. Obierika warns Okonkwo again he shouldn't have been part of the killing as it was for actions like that the Earth goddess killed entire families. They stop arguing only when Obierika's son, Ofoedu comes to tell them that Ogbuefi Ndulue as well as his oldest wife, Ozoemena, have both died.



The conclusion of the chapter describes the customs that accompany the process of agreeing upon a bride price and preparing for a wedding. The men use broom straws to determine the bride price, believing this is the best way and other customs are backward.

Analysis

Okonkwo's participation in the murder of Ikemefuna is one of the major topics of these two chapters. Keep in mind that it is Ezeudu who warns Okonkwo not to take part in Ikemefuna's death. He tells Okonkwo it is especially important for him to not participate in the murder because Ikemefuna called Okonkwo his father. Later, Obierika, who has not attended the murder, questions Okonkwo concerning his motives about going with the men. He tells Okonkwo that he made a very bad choice when he chose to participate in the murder, one that could cause the gods to punish him and his family.

Ikemefuna's murder has an effect on Okonkwo as well as his son, Nwoye. Okonkwo does what he considers the "manly" things and goes with the group who is to kill Ikemefuna when they ask. He is even the one who kills the boy. After he returns to the village, however, Okonkwo is deeply depressed for several days. He cannot eat or sleep. He chides himself for becoming a woman in his emotions. For Okonkwo, being emotional and feeling guilty is synonymous with being a woman, whom he considers the weaker sex. Ikemefuna's murder not only affects Okonkwo, but also hurts his relationship with his son, Nwoye. Nwoye, who had begun becoming a man that Okonkwo approved of with Ikemefuna's influence, is pushed even further from his father than before Ikemefuna lived with the family.

It is in this section of the novel that Nwoye's emotional tenderness comes out. He had heard in the past about twin infants being abandoned in the evil forest as was dictated by his people's culture. He remembers the pain that he felt when he first heard the sounds of the dying babies in the wilderness. He feels the same deep sadness and uncertainty in the tradition as he realizes the inhumanity of the procedure.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that Okonkwo is so upset by Ikemefuna's death?

Discussion Question 2

What is Nwoye's reaction to Ikemefuna's death?

Discussion Question 3

Why is it such an issue that Okonkwo takes part in Ikemefuna's murder?



Vocabulary

tendril, feign, emissary, entrails, harbingers, copiously, pestle, effeminate, elusive, plantains, impregnate, expelled, indulgently, coiffure, succulent



Part 1 Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter Nine

In Chapter Nine, Okonkwo is finally able to sleep. He is awakened the next morning by Ekwefi banging on his door telling him that Ezinma is dying. Okonkwo goes with her to where Ezinma is suffering with a fever. Ekwefi has had ten children, nine of which died before they turned three. The people of the village believe Ekwefi is haunted by an ogbanje, an evil child who dies but enters its mother's womb to be born again. The family follows all sorts of rituals to keep the ogbanje from returning, but each time they are disappointed. It was not until Ezinma had lived past her sixth year that her mother had believed the child which still became ill intermittently, would really survive. Okonkwo tries to doctor the child with barks from medicinal trees and shrubs. The girl finally sleeps.

Chapter Ten

In Chapter Ten, the men gather for a trial outside the egwugwu. No women are allowed in the egwugwu. The women who had gathered disappear as soon as the egwugwu appear. Okonkwo is one of the men dressed as the gods. Uzowulu is accusing his in-laws of beating him up and taking his wife and children. Since his wife has not returned to him, Uzowulu reasons that her bride-price should be returned to him. Odukwue, however, tells the court that Uzowulu is a beast and beat his wife daily, once causing her to miscarry. Evil Forest tells Uzowulu to take his in-laws a pot of wine and beg that his wife be returned to him. He tells the in-laws that if Uzowulu does this, they should return his wife.

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Discussion Question 1

How is justice carried out in Okonkwo's community?

Discussion Question 2

How is Nwoye influenced by the villagers' custom of leaving twins to die?

Discussion Question 3

What is an ogbanje? How is it treated?

Vocabulary

audacity, rebuke, devoid, amiss, mutilate, malevolence, specious, communal, defiance, guttural, pandemonium, esoteric, approbation



Part 1 Chapters 11-12

Summary

Chapter Eleven

In Chapter Eleven, after supper Ekwfi tells Ezinma a story about a tortoise who tricks birds into taking him to a feast. The birds get their revenge when they direct the tortoise to jump from the sky. He does not die, but his shell breaks, explaining why the tortoise's shell has cracks. Ezinma starts to tell a story but is interrupted when Chielo, the priestess begins to prophesy. She tells Okonkwo that Agbala wants to see Ezinma. Okonkwo first asks Chielo to come back the following day. Then, Ekwfi demands to be allowed to go with them. Both requests are denied. Ezinma is put on Chielo's back. Although she has been told not to, Ekwfi follows Chielo and Ezinma. Once Chielo senses Ekwfi is following her and threatens her, telling her she must go back home. Ekwfi does not leave; she only increases the space between the two of them.

When Chielo and Ezinma disappear into the cave of Agbala, Ekwfi sits down to wait. She swears that if she hears her child cry she will go into the cave to try to save her. As she waits, Okonkwo walks up behind her. Ekwfi is grateful that Okonkwo has come. They wait together. Ekwfi remembers when she ran away to Okonkwo and he had taken her into his bed.

Chapter Twelve

In Chapter Twelve, Obierika is celebrating his daughter's uri. Cooking preparations are interrupted for a short while so that the women can go and catch a cow that has gotten out. The remainder of the chapter details the festivities and rituals associated with a marriage. At the end of the day Okonkwo is one of the men to whom the bride and groom pay a special visit. Okonkwo gives the couple a gift of two cocks.

Analysis

Significant here is the importance of storytelling and ritual in this Nigerian village. Ekwefi tells Ezinma a story that explains why a tortoise's shell looks as if it is made of many different pieces that have been put together. She also challenges Ezinma to tell her a story, encouraging Ezinma to get involved in learning and passing down their rituals and beliefs.

Although Okonkwo would not admit it to anyone, it becomes obvious in this section of the novel about how much he cares for his daughter, Ezinma. It has been mentioned before that he wishes that she were a boy because she would be better than Nwoye. It is also known that Ezinma looks much like her mother, who was once the most beautiful girl in the town. Okonkwo's concern for his daughter becomes obvious when the priestess orders that the girl come with her without telling either of her parents where



she was taking her. Ekwefi follows the priestess every step and is surprised when they arrive at her cave to see Okonkwo already sitting there. He stays with her and follows when the priestess heads back to the village with Ezinma. This is one of the rare occasions on which Okonkwo allows himself to show his concern for the girl in public.

Discussion Question 1

Why are Ekwefi and Okonkwo so disturbed when the priestess demands that Ezinma be allowed to go with her?

Discussion Question 2

In what way are rituals and stories important to this people's culture?

Discussion Question 3

How does Okonkwo give away the fact that he cares deeply for Ezinma in these two chapters?

Vocabulary

impenetrably, notorious, voluble, orator, incipient, imposed



Part 1 Chapter 13

Summary

Chapter Thirteen

In Chapter Thirteen the news is spread that Ezeudu, the man who warned Okonkwo not to get involved in Ikemefuna's death, is dead. This chapter describes the rituals associated with a warrior's funeral. The funeral is violent and tumultuous with evil ghosts and banging drums. Guns are fired as spirits appear. Near the end of the funeral, after the last gun salute, the crowd falls silent because Okonkwo's gun has exploded, accidentally killing Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son.

Although the death was an accident, Okonkwo and his family are forced to run from their village. He and his wives seek refuge in Okonkwo's mother land for the required seven years. Although the men of the village do not think badly of Okonkwo, they destroy his home and kill his livestock because it is part of the requirements of the earth goddess. After they have finished the requirements, Obierika thinks about what they have done and mourns for his friend because of what happened to him accidentally. He also mourns the loss of his twin children whom he realizes did nothing wrong.

Analysis

It seems almost like poetic justice that it is during Ezeudu's funeral that this terrible accident takes place and causes Okonkwo to be thrown out of his village. It is the turning point in his life when all that Okonkwo has worked for is lost. Remember that it was Ezeudu who warned Okonkwo against taking part in Ikemefuna's death. Obierika echoes Ezeudu's concerns, telling him that it is for actions like this that the gods punish entire families. It appears that Okonkwo's attempt to prove his manhood in being the one to kill Ikemefuna, turns out to be his own undoing. While it is clear that the boy's death is an accident, the people of Okonkwo's village have no choice but to follow through with the recommended punishment. These people have rules that govern the way they deal with certain crimes. These rules cannot be broken, and the people of the village do not allow circumstances to sway their judgment. After Okonkwo is forced out of the village, however, Obierika thinks about the way that Okonkwo has been dealt with in an unjust fashion, even though the rules are intended to ensure that all people are treated equally. It seems in his line of thinking that he may be considering that there is a better way to live.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it ironic that it is during Ezeudu's funeral that Okonkwo accidentally kills a boy?



Discussion Question 2

Why is Okonkwo punished even though the shooting was an accident?

Discussion Question 3

What is Okonkwo's punishment for the unintentional murder? Do you think it is adequate? Too harsh? Not harsh enough?

Vocabulary

lamentation, tumult



Part 2 Chapters 14-15

Summary

Chapter Fourteen

In Chapter Fourteen, Okonkwo is welcomed into his mother's homeland by his uncle, Uchendu. He is given land to build a home for himself and huts for his wife. He is also given land to farm and yam seeds to start his new farm. Okonkwo works hard to start his new farm but without the fire and enthusiasm that he had in youth. He is depressed because he has missed his chance to become one of the great lords of his clan. After the final confession ceremony for the girl who is marrying his youngest son, Uchendu speaks to Okonkwo about his despair. It is in a gathering of the men that Uchendu asks Okonkwo why the people say that "Mother is Supreme." He tells him that it is because as the mother is a place of comfort and refuge for a child, the motherland is also a place of refuge for an adult. He warns Okonkwo that it is wrong for him to have such a sorrowful outlook on life and refuse to find comfort in his motherland. He tells Okonkwo that he must take care of himself so that he and his wives and children can return to their home in seven years and not die in exile. He also reminds Okonkwo that he is not the only person with problems and sorrows but that others, like himself who has lost twenty-two children and many wives, have found a way to move on.

Chapter Fifteen

In Chapter Fifteen, Obierika visits Okonkwo during his second year of exile. Okonkwo introduces Obierika to Uchendu. Obierika tells them that the clan of Abame has been wiped out. He says that a strange white man riding an iron horse had come to the town. Their Oracle warned them this man would break the clan and spread destruction. To keep this from happening, they kill the man and tie his iron horse to a tree. Later when the other white men come looking for the first one, they find the horse. They come back later on a full market day and shoot all but a few people in the town. Obierika also brings Okonkwo the money he has earned for selling his yams.

Analysis

Although Okonkwo is welcomed into his mother's homeland, he is very unhappy there. He is not afraid to let people know that he is unhappy. Uchendu notices Okonkwo's unhappiness and tries to convince him that matters could be worse. When one considers that the only thing that motivated Okonkwo was his desire to be a great leader in his community. This banishment because of an accident seems terribly unfair to a man who has worked so hard to make up for his father's laziness.



Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that Obierka continues to be friends with Okonkwo?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the importance of a person's chi.

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Okonkwo and Uchendu's bad experiences. How are they similar? How are they different?

Vocabulary

requisite, begot, ominous



Part 2 Chapters 16-17

Summary

Chapter Sixteen

In Chapter Sixteen, two years later, Obierika visits Okonkwo to tell him that missionaries have come to Umuofia. These new missionaries have converts, but none of them are men of power in the clan. It is believed the new religion will not last. Obierika, however, has seen Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, with the missionaries. Okonkwo will not talk about Nwoye but the boy's mother tells the story. When the white men had come to Mbanta all the people had gone out to see them. The man tells them that their gods are false. The men laugh. At the end of his talk, Okonkwo is determined that the man is mad. Nwoye, however, likes the poetry of the religion.

Chapter Seventeen

In Chapter Seventeen, the missionaries ask the rulers of Mbanta for a place they can build a church. Uchendu decided to give the missionaries a portion of the village's Evil Forrest to build their church. The people of Mbanta are surprised when the missionaries don't die after the first several days in the Evil Forrest. It is after this that they begin to attract converts. Although Nwoye has been attracted to the religion since he first heard the missionaries, he does not go into the church for fear of the Evil Forest. As time goes on and the limit which it was believed that the gods would not allow men to go on denying them passes, another several converts are added to the congregation, along with the first woman. Since the woman has given birth to twins four times, no one in the village is really sad to see her join the Christians.

It is Amikwu who tells Okonkwo that Nwoye is hanging out with the Christians. When Okonkwo sees Nwoye next, he grasps his son by the neck. When Nwoye does not tell his father where he has been, his father hits him with a stick. Nwoye will still not tell, but Uchendu yells at Okonkwo to leave Nwoye alone. Nwoye leaves his father and tells the missionaries that he wants to go to Umuofia. Okonkwo thinks briefly about destroying the church with his machete but decides that Nwoye is not worth the effort. He wonders briefly if Nwoye is even his son, but realizes that the boy is too much like his own father.

Analysis

The most significant part of these chapters is the introduction of Christianity to the village and its effects on the people. Being firmly rooted in the old ways, Okonkwo refuses to see any possibility of truth in the things that the missionaries try to teach. At the beginning of the missionaries' time in their area, the people of Okonkwo's tribe don't think they will last long as not many people of power are being swayed by their ideas.



In a crushing blow for Okonkwo, however, his own son is among those who do decide there is something for them in the new religion. Okonkwo is embarrassed and humiliated by his son. In fact, the boy acts in a way that is so different from him that Okonkwo wonders for a short time if the boy is even his. When he takes a closer look, however, he realizes that the boy gets his tendencies for laziness and probably also his attraction to the poetics of Christianity, through his grandfather's genes.

One of the most telling victories for the Christians is their survival in the Evil Forest. This victory is ironic because the missionaries don't even realize that the people of the village believe that they are orchestrating the deaths of the missionaries by letting them build their church in the part of town which they refer to as the Evil Forest. They only rejoice that the natives have allowed them to have any land at all. When the missionaries build their church, then continue to live despite the time spent in this forest, the natives begin to wonder if the God they serve might really be more powerful than their gods.

Discussion Question 1

Why do the people of Okonkwo's village give the missionaries part of the land in the Evil Forest on which to build their church?

Discussion Question 2

What is Okonkwo's initial opinion of the missionaries?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Nwoye attracted to Christianity?

Vocabulary

converts, excrement, dialect, benevolently, deceit, derisive, callow, fetish, impudent, perturbed, intoned, miscreant, degenerate



Part 2 Chapters 18-19

Summary

Chapter Eighteen

In Chapter Eighteen, the villagers of Mbanta are worried about the missionaries but believe that they will not be punished for their sins. It is not until three of the converts come into the village and claim they will burn the shrines of the village gods that they villagers hurt any of these people. They beat the men and after that nothing happens for a long time between the people of the village and the missionaries.

The villagers soon learn that the missionaries have set up their own government to protect themselves. They have even hanged one man who killed a missionary. Because the converts are still clan members, if a convert kills one of them, they have to flee the clan. The church, meanwhile, is dealing with the logistics of admitting outcasts into the church. Although at least one clan member leaves the church when outcasts are allowed in, many stay. The outcasts are convinced to shave their hair and when they don't die, many of them join the church and become the most loyal members.

It is these outcasts that cause serious trouble between the church and the village when the Sacred Python is killed by one of them. Okonkwo tells the men of the village that the missionaries and their converts must be driven from the village. Another, however, suggests they pretend like what happened was not seen. In the end, the people decide to ostracize the Christians.

When the women prepare to clean the church in observance of Easter, they learn the people of the village have outlawed them from getting chalk, red earth and water. The converts tell their leader that they have never heard of anyone ever being debarred from the stream or the quarry. Although the men want to punish the clansmen, they learn that Okoli is dead. He is the one who allegedly killed the sacred python. The people of the village believe after this that it has become known that their gods are able to take care of themselves and do not worry about the missionaries any longer.

Chapter Nineteen

In Chapter Nineteen, the years of Okonkwo's exile are coming to an end. He sends money to Obierika to build him two new huts on his old property. Okonkwo prepares a big feast to thank the people of his motherland for taking care of him during his exile. The oldest member makes a speech, telling the group that he is worried about the younger members of the family because he doesn't feel they understand the bond of family. He says this is why they now have a strange religion that has grown up among them.



Analysis

It is in this section of chapters that the older members of the Nigerian clans begin to worry about the loyalties of the younger members. These younger men do not seem to have the allegiances or appreciate the bond of family that the older members of the clan do.

Meanwhile, the missionaries begin causing trouble for the clansman. The people of the villages believe that the missionaries will be punished by the gods for the way they are acting. It is not until the missionaries begin coming into the village and threatening the things that are sacred to the villagers that the villagers strike out against the missionaries. Things become serious when one of the villagers kills a missionary. The government set up by the white people orders that the man be hanged.

Discussion Question 1

How do the missionaries actually harm their own ministry in the way they treat the villagers?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the differences that Okonkwo is seeing in his own culture. How does this cause him stress?

Discussion Question 3

What specific instance makes the people of the village believe that their gods will take care of them?

Vocabulary

derision, heathen, emanation, blasphemous, ostracize, debar, abominable



Part 3 Chapters 20-21

Summary

Chapter Twenty

In Chapter Twenty when Okonkwo returns to his clan, he knows that the places that he once held have been filled by other people. However, he has been planning his return to his village ever since his exile began. When Okonkwo's exile first began, it appeared that his luck had changed. Then, he had lost his first son to the new religion. He warns his other sons of their outcomes if they decide to follow the new religion as Nwoye did. His one regret is that his daughter, Ezinma, was not a boy as she seems to understand him best. Although she is very beautiful and has had many suitors, she has turned each of them down because she knows that her father wants her to marry someone in Umuofia. Ezinma encourages her half-sister to wait as well. Okonkwo plans for the two to marry influential men in the community.

The community has changed since Okonkwo was forced into exile. Ogbuefi Ugonna, one of the most influential men in the community, has joined the new religion. The white men have also set up a government and court where a district commissioner judges cases. Although Okonkwo thinks the people of his village should bind together and run the Christians out of the town, Obierka tells him that they are too deeply ingrained in the society already. He believes they would be wiped out just like the village of Abame. He tells Okonkwo that the white men do not understand nor do they follow the Nigerian customs. Because the members of their clan have joined the Christians, the clans can no longer work together as they once did. He tells Okonkwo the outcome of a man who killed another in a dispute over a piece of land. The man is captured and hanged by the white men.

Chapter Twenty-One

In Chapter Twenty-One, many of the people in the clan do not think as badly of the new religion and the white men as Okonkwo does. The head missionary tries to keep the Christians from irritating the people of the clan as little as possible. Mr. Brown takes the time to try to understand the beliefs of the Nigerians. He uses what he has learned about the people to encourage them to send their children to his school. Soon adults as well as children begin attending the school. Bad health, however, causes Mr. Brown to have to leave the church.

Okonkwo's return does not make the impression on his village that he hoped that it would have. In fact, the village has changed so much that Okonkwo barely recognizes it. He also has to wait two years before he can introduce his sons into ozo society. Okonkwo grieves for his clan as well as for the warlike men who had lived in his village. He believes they have become like women.



Analysis

As much as Okonkwo had looked forward to returning to his home village, he almost doesn't understand his home once he gets there. The missionaries have taken a hold on the area and many people have joined the church. New people have filled the spots that he once filled. Okonkwo feels that he needs to try to carve out a new place for himself in his old society but isn't really sure what his place will be.

It is at this point that Okonkwo first begins to consider that the warlike tribe that he used to be a member of is no more. He understood this warlike tribe. He was able to succeed in it. He doesn't understand the new people and the new attitudes that have taken over the men that he once thought were so manly. Although he believes that the men have become like women, there seems to be some idea that these men will eventually get tired of the white men and stand up for themselves.

Discussion Question 1

What does Okonkwo tell his sons will happen to them if they decide to join the church?

Discussion Question 2

What does Okonkwo wish about Ezinma?

Discussion Question 3

What things have changed when Okonkwo returns to his home village?

Vocabulary

converts, evangelists, excrement, dialect, neglected, captivated, inhabitants, congregation, unduly, miscreant



Part 3 Chapters 22-23

Summary

Chapter Twenty-Two

In Chapter Twenty-Two, Mr. Brown is succeeded by a man who sees things either as evil or good. He desires large numbers of converts and is unhappy with the ignorance many people in the church still have. He suspends one woman from the church because she allows her husband to mutilate her child, which is believed to be evil. Because of his attitudes, those converts whom Mr. Brown had tried to restrain and allowed to flourish. One of these people is Enoch who becomes responsible for bringing to a furor a conflict between the church and clan in Umuofia.

On the day of worship of the earth goddess, the men have asked the egwugwu to withdraw so that the women can go home. They are doing so but Enoch calls out an offense that keeps them from retiring. One of the men hits Enoch with his cane. Enoch pulls off the man's mask. In the beliefs of the clan, Enoch has killed one of the spirits. They believe that the Mother of Spirits weeps for her son that night.

The next day all of the egwugwu from Umuofia as well as some from neighboring villages gathers and heads for Enoch's compound. The evening before, the Christians had met with Mr. Smith. He appears afraid of the Nigerians for the first time. They pray, and decide to hide Enoch in the parsonage. The egwugwu destroy Enoch's compound, then move on to the church. Mr. Smith meets the spirits although he wants to run away. Mr. Smith's interpreter, Okeke, comes and stands beside him. The spirits rush the two men but part when Ajofia, the head egwugwu begins to speak. He tells Okeke that because they liked Mr. Brown, they will not harm Mr. Smith, but that they will destroy the church. The spirits are briefly pacified by burning the church.

Chapter Twenty-Three

In Chapter Twenty-Three, Okonkwo seems to feel happiness again. He is pleased because the men have listened to him and have done something substantial to discourage the Christians. The pastor and district commissioner meet, then the messengers invite the leaders of Umuofia to meet with him. Okonkwo is among the six leaders called to meet with the District Commissioner. Under the guise of hearing their story, twelve men that the commissioner has called in arrest the leaders of Umuofia. They are told they will be released as soon as they pay a fine of two hundred bags of cowries.

Although the court messengers are told to treat the men with respect, they shave the men's heads as soon as the commissioner is gone. They are given nothing to eat or drink and are not allowed to use the bathroom. The messengers overhear the men talking about killing and one of them hits each of the men several times with a stick. The



people of Umuofia are told that if they do not pay the fines, their leaders will be hung. That night the village of Umuofia is quiet and scared until the crier calls the men to a morning meeting. The men decide to pay the fine though they don't know the messengers have raised the fine by fifty bags.

Analysis

Okonkwo believes the tribe has finally come to its senses after Enoch unmasks an egwugwu, symbolically killing that god. In retaliation for this great crime against their gods, the men of the village burn the missionaries' church. Okonkwo is happy that the men have finally stood up for themselves but the men are tricked and taken as prisoners. While they are being held the men are ridiculed, beaten and kept from using the bathroom. When the men are finally allowed to leave, they are told they must pay a fine or their leaders will be killed. Since the people of the village are on such uncertain ground with the way these white men might actually act, they decide to pay the requested fine.

What happens in this section of the novel is the result of a clash of cultures paired with people who feel they are superior. The white men have little respect for the natives, their laws and their ways of life. They believe they can come onto their land and the natives to act as they do even though the natives don't understand why the white men act as they do. The white men also do not understand many of the customs of the Nigerian people. Instead of trying to understand, however, these white people try to force the Nigerians to act and think as they do.

Discussion Question 1

Why do Okonkwo and the other men agree to meet with the court messengers?

Discussion Question 2

For what crime is the church burned?

Discussion Question 3

Why do the people of Okonkwo's village agree to pay the fine imposed by the District Commissioner?

Vocabulary

mutilate, deity, parsonage, imminent, discordant, pacified, palavers, appease



Part 3 Chapters 24-25

Summary

Chapter Twenty-Four

In Chapter Twenty-Four, Okonkwo and the other men are set free as soon as the fine is paid. They do not listen to the District Commissioner's talk about peace and good government. Each man goes to his own compound. Ezinma has food ready when her father returns home, and he eats to please her and the other friends who are there. That night the town crier calls that another meeting has been scheduled for the following morning. Okonkwo gets his war gear ready. He wants vengeance for the way he was treated in court. Okonkwo plans to avenge himself if his community as a whole decides against war.

The marketplace is crowded when Okonkwo and Obierika arrive. Okonkwo is pleased by the number of men who are there but is unhappy that Egonwanne is there as well. Okika is the first to speak at the meeting. He tries to convince the men they must fight even though it will require them to fight against their brothers, something their fathers would never have done. There is a sudden stir as five court messengers approach the meeting. Okonkwo, who is sitting near the edge of the men, jumps up, and confronts the head messenger. The messenger orders to be allowed to pass. He says the white men have ordered the meeting be stopped. Okonkwo uses his machete to separate the man's head from his body. He suddenly knows that the men will not go to war. They don't understand why he has acted as he has.

Chapter Twenty-Five

In Chapter Twenty-Five, Okonkwo is not at his compound when the white men come looking for him. The men gathered at Okonkwo's obi offer to show the men where Okonkwo is. They take the men to where Okonkwo has hung himself. They hope that the white men will help them take his body down and bury it. They explain only strangers can handle the body of a person who has committed suicide. Obierika tells the commissioner that Okonkwo was one of the greatest men in the village, driven to kill himself by the white men. The commissioner thinks that the story will make an interesting addition to the book he is planning to write about the Nigerian people.

Analysis

The reality of the new life in his village sinks in for Okonkwo when he realizes that the men will not fight against the white men who are taking over their lifestyle. Believing he is doing what a warrior should do, Okonkwo steps forward and kills the court messenger who demands that the village meeting be stopped. When none of the men step forward to back him up, Okonkwo knows that he cannot fight alone against the white men. Instead of allowing himself to be killed by these men, he kills himself. In this way,



Okonkwo dies a less honorable death than even his father did. Because he is a suicide, the people of his village are not even allowed to touch Okonkwo to cut him down from where he hangs. Obierika hopes the men will help by cutting Okonkwo down and burying him. The men are ordered by the District Commissioner to take down the body and bring it, and the men, to court. As it has been demonstrated in the past, the people will probably not be treated fairly during this meeting either.

Discussion Question 1

What is ironic about the title the District Commissioner has chosen for his book?

Discussion Question 2

What does Okonkwo do that the other men in his tribe are not willing to do? How is he punished for his actions?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Obierika angry at the way that Okonkwo had to die? What does he hope that the District Commissioner and his men will do?

Vocabulary

administered, irreparable, exile, astray, sacrament, indignity, dispensation, expedient, unaccountability



Characters

Okonkwo

Okonkwo is character around which the story “Things Fall Apart” centers. Okonkwo desires to be a respected member of his Nigerian clan, a successful yam farmer, and fearless warrior. In short, he wants to be everything that his father was not. He detests the characteristics of idleness and laziness that defined his father and is disappointed when his eldest son seems to take after the man.

From a young age, Okonkwo sets about working hard so that he can have the life that he intends. Because of a freak accident, however, Okonkwo is banished from his home village for seven years and forced to seek refuge in his mother’s homeland. Everything he had worked for up to that point in this life is gone.

Although he succeeds in his motherland, everything has changed in Okonkwo’s village when he is allowed to return. Christians have come into the area spreading their form of the gospel and trying to persuade the natives their way of thinking about both religion and justice is wrong. Okonkwo’s oldest son joins the Christians, causing Okonkwo to disown him.

In a dispute over a murdered village leader, Okonkwo and his friends are tricked by the white men’s soldiers and arrested. While under arrest they are treated disrespectfully and can do nothing to avenge themselves. Okonkwo reaches the breaking point when the men of his clan, whom he believed were fearless warriors, refuse to fight against the white men even after they have treated them so badly. Okonkwo kills a messenger coming to break up the meeting where Okonkwo had believed the men would decide to go to war, then hangs himself, a death even more disrespected than his father’s.

Unoka

Unoka is Okonkwo’s father. Unoka is lazy and does not work to make his living as it is believed the men of the village should. Instead, he sits around his hut during the day and plays his flute. He loves gentleness and idleness. Unoka is chided by the priestess Agbala when he goes to her to inquire why his crops don’t produce well. Agbala screams at him that he must go home and work like a man. Unoka refuses to pay his debts, claiming that he has to pay the big ones first. He dies deeply in debt and leaves no inheritance for Okonkwo. He is also known as a coward who does not like war and cannot stand the sight of blood. Even Unoka death is a disgrace as he dies of swelling, which is said to be an abomination to the Earth goddess. He was not even allowed to die in his house, but was taken out to the Evil Forrest and left to die.



Obierika

One of the most significant characteristics of Obierika is that he is a man who thinks about things. He doesn't blindly follow ritual and custom, but instead thinks about the reasons why things are done. For this reason, he mourns the unfairness of Okonkwo's banishment. Obierika is the clan member who does not go along with the group of the men when they go out of the village to kill Ikemefuna. Obierika believes that while the oracle had said the boy was to be killed, he did not feel he had to be the one to do the killing in order to not be going against the oracle's command. It is Obierika's daughter who gets married during the course of the novel. When Okonkwo is banished from the village, Obierika allows Okonkwo's yams to be stored in his barns.

Nwoye (Isaac)

Nwoye is Okonkwo's oldest son. He is an embarrassment to his father because of his laziness. After the Christians come to the villages, Okonkwo disowns Nwoye because he converts to Christianity. As a Christian, Nwoye is given the name Isaac. Nwoye becomes close friends with Ikemefuna, the boy brought to the village to avenge a murder. Is hurt, upset when Ikemefuna is taken away. Also chilled when he first hears the sounds of twins who had been left in the woods to die, crying. When Okonkwo first learns that Nwoye has attended the Christian church, he chokes the boy demanding to know where he has been. Nwoye walks out of the hut and does not return.

Enoch

Enoch is the son of the priest of the snake cult. It is believed by the people of the village of Umuofia that Enoch killed and ate the sacred python. Enoch's faith is great in the new religion but he seems to think that all of the sermons are preached for the benefit of others. Enoch is responsible for starting the conflict between the church and clan of villagers. He does this by removing the mask from one of the egwugwu. Enoch hopes that his actions will bring about a holy war. He is disappointed when the Christians insist he be hidden in the parsonage and then the villagers decide only to destroy the church building.

Ezinma

Ezinma is the daughter of Ekwfi and Okonkwo. Okonkwo often wished that Ezinma was a boy because she has more sense than his oldest son. Ezinma is the only child of Ekwfi that has survived. Both parents are worried when Ezinma becomes ill and almost dies during the course of the novel. Ezinma had been ill throughout her life because she was believed to be an ogbanje, a child who dies then returns to its mother's womb to be return then die again. Ezinma helps the men of the clan find her iyi-uwa. They are worried again when Agbala requests to see Ezinma just after she has recovered from her last illness.



Ikemefuna

Ikemefuna is the boy who is taken from the village of Umuofia to amend for the murder of a woman of Okonkwo's village. Ikemefuna lives in the home with Nwoye and his mother for three years until the men of the village are ordered to take the boy and kill him. While he is living with Okonkwo, both Nwoye and Okonkwo develop an affection for the boy. With Ikemefuna's influence, Nwoye tries to be the man that his father wants him to be.

Agbala

Agbala is the Oracle of the Hills. Helps with misfortune or disputes between neighbors. Can contact spirits of dead fathers. Can tell the future. Consults from a shrine inside a hill. No one has seen him except his priestess. It is to Agbala that Chielo takes Ezinma. When Okonkwo's father goes to consult Agbala about his poor harvests, the goddess tells him he must work like a man. After Ezinma recovers from her illness, Agbala requests to see her.

District Commissioner

It is the District Commissioner who tries to bring the government of the white people into the Nigerian tribes. He is writing a book about his experiences that he plans to call "The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger." He riles Okonkwo's anger when he tricks Okonkwo and five other leaders of the village into court under the guise of listening to their side of the story, then has them arrested.

Ajofia

Ajofia is the leading egwugwu of Umuofia. He is the spokesman for the nine ancestors who administer justice in the village. It is Ajofia who addresses Mr. Smith after one of the egwugwu is killed. He decides that Mr. Smith will not be harmed because of the murder because they had liked Mr. Brown so well but that Brown's church building will be destroyed as his punishment.

Uchendu

Uchendu is Okonkwo's mother's younger brother. He is the man who meets Okonkwo when Okonkwo has to return to his mother's homeland after being banished. It is this same man who had accepted the body of Okonkwo's mother when she was returned to her homeland to be buried. When he notices that Okonkwo is deeply depressed in his banishment, he tries to encourage him in his situation.



Egonwanne

Egonwanne is the man who Okonkwo is afraid will be called upon to speak at the meeting of the men. Okonkwo deems Egonwanne a coward and says that his womanly voice moves men to impotence. He feels that if the men had not listened to Egonwanne five years ago, they would not be in the situation they are today.

Akunna

Akunna is a great man from a neighboring village who allows one of his sons to attend Mr. Brown's school. Although he disagrees with Mr. Brown, Akunna debates with the man the differences in their religious beliefs. The two learn the basis of each other's faith and develops respect for the other.

Nwakibie

Nwakibie is the highest man in Okonkwo's clan. It is for this man whom Okonkwo works to earn his first yam seeds. Nwakibie gives Okonkwo 800 yams, many more than Okonkwo was expecting.

Ojiugo

Ojiugo is Okonkwo's youngest wife. Ojiugo angers Okonkwo by going to a neighbor's house to fix her hair. Even though it is the Week of Peace, Okonkwo beats her badly as a result of her inconsideration.

Ekwefi

Ekwefi is Ezinma's mother. She had first married another man because she thought Okonkwo was too poor to marry. She remained married to the other man for two years before she left him to go to Okonkwo.

Chielo

Chielo is both a priestess of Agbala and a widow with two children who lives in Okonkwo's village. Since Ezinma is feared to be a ogbanje and is sick often, Chielo takes the girl to Agbala.



Ogbuefi Ezeudu

Ogbuefi Ezeudu is the oldest man in the village. He was a fearless warrior in his time and highly respected member of the clan. He is the one who warns Okonkwo to not assist in Ikemefuna's death because the boy called Okonkwo father.

Mr. Brown

Mr. Brown is the first pastor at the church in Umuofia. He endears himself to the people because he is considerate of the villagers and their beliefs. Bad health causes Mr. Brown to have to give up his position.

James Smith

James Smith is the second pastor sent to the church in Umuofia. He is the opposite of Mr. Brown. He sees only good and evil with no shades of gray.

Ogbuefi Ugonna

Ogbuefi Ugonna is a worthy man of the village of Umuofia who has joined the Christians.

Aneto

Aneto is the man hanged by the white men following a land dispute. Aneto had killed a man during the dispute.

Amikwu

Amikwu is one of Uchendu's sons. It is he who tells Okonkwo that he has seen Nwoye among the Christians in a neighboring village.

Maduka

Maduka is Obierika's son. Okonkwo admires the boy because he wins a wrestling match.

Ani

Ani is the name of the Earth Goddess.



Symbols and Symbolism

“The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger”

“The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger” is the title that the District Commissioner plans to assign to his novel.

Evil Forest

The evil forest is where the people of Umuofia allowed the white missionaries to build their church, believing the land was cursed and the men would die there within days.

Seven Market Weeks

Seven market weeks is a significant time period for the people of Okonkwo’s tribe. It is this much time that passes between the time a baby is born and its naming ceremony. Before they are married, a bride is taken to her suitor’s home to spend seven market weeks with that family. Generally, seven market weeks is also the amount of time the people believed the gods would put up with a man purposefully defying them before they were punished.

Seven Years

Seven years is the amount of time that Okonkwo is required to stay in his mother’s homeland after the accidental death of –’s son.

An Old Rusty Gun

Okonkwo gets an old rusty gun because he wants to go hunting but he instead uses the gun to shoot at one of his wives when she makes him angry.

Yams

Yam is considered the king of crops in this novel. It is a man’s crop.

Agbala’s Cave

Chielo takes Ezinma to Agbala’s cave. Okonkwo and Ekwefi follow and wait outside for their favorite daughter.



Ashy-Buttocks

The people of Umuofia call the court messengers this name because of the ash-colored shorts that they wear.

Sacred Python

The sacred python is believed to be the emanation of the god of water.

Jesu Kristi

Jesu Kristi is the God about whom the missionaries try to teach the Nigerian people.

Pebble Wrapped in a Dirty Rag

The pebble is Ezinma's iyi-uwa which the people of the village believe that she has hidden so that she can return to her mother's womb after she has died.

Feast of the New Yam

The Feast of the New Yam is a festival celebrated at the beginning of the yam harvest.

Palm Wine

Palm wine is a beverage drunk often in this novel. This type of wine is made by tapping palm trees.

Seven Years

Seven years is the amount of time that Okonkwo is required to stay in his mother's homeland after he accidentally kills a boy.

Banana Tree

It is a banana tree about which Okonkwo gets angry because he does not like the inactivity of the feast time. Although just a few leaves have been taken from the tree, Okonkwo demands to know who killed the tree.



Kola Nut

A kola nut is a sign of life. Guests often bring this food as a way to honor a person whom they are visiting.

Umuofia

Umuofia is the land of Okonkwo's father.

Abame

Abame is a Nigeria clan that is wiped out by the white men.

Settings

Evil Forest

The evil forest is where the people of Umuofia allowed the white missionaries to build their church, believing the land was cursed and the men would die there within days.

Abame

Abame is a Nigerian clan that is wiped out by the white men.

Umuofia

Umuofia is the land of Okonkwo's father.

Nigeria

The country of Nigeria is the main setting of the novel.



Themes and Motifs

Okonkwo's Misfortune

Although Okonkwo strives to be a different type of person than his father, he still faces a great amount of misfortune despite his hard work. One of the biggest things that Okonkwo has working against him is his temper. He gets angry quickly. He is punished when he gets angry with one of his wives and beats her during the week of peace. Okonkwo shoots at another of his wives when he hears her make fun of him under his breath. While these slight infractions on Okonkwo's part have given him a reputation in his village, it is a pure accident that causes Okonkwo to be cast out of his village. At Ezeudu's funeral, Okonkwo's gun explodes and Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son is killed when a shard of the metal pierces his heart. Although all of the men recognize that the death was accidental, they must punish Okonkwo as it is decreed by their village law. For this reason, Okonkwo's complex is destroyed and he is forced to go and live in his mother's homeland for seven years.

When Okonkwo is finally able to return to his homeland, things have changed dramatically. His son has become a Christian, a change in religion that is an embarrassment to Okonkwo. Okonkwo feels deceived by his own family. Christians have also set up a church in Umuofia. These Christians are trying to convince other Nigerians to give up their customs and long held religious beliefs. To Okonkwo's disgust, some members of his village are swayed by the Christians.

The men of the village are also less warlike than Okonkwo believes they should be when he returns to his village. They allow the Christians to set up camp in their village, and they do not rise up against the men who have come to Nigeria to bring law and order to the area. Okonkwo and several other men in the tribe are treated unfairly because they burn the Christian church. When they return home after being abused and humiliated, Okonkwo believes then that they will stand up against the messengers but they do not. Because the people of his village have disappointed him so badly and have become so different from the war like people he believes they should be, Okonkwo kills himself. This death is considered worse by the people of Umuofia than that of Okonkwo's father. Following their beliefs, the people of Umuofia are not even allowed to touch Okonkwo's body to cut him down from where he has hung himself.

Introduction of Christianity

One of the more important themes in the novel is the different ways in which the missionaries try to introduce Christianity to the Nigerians. It is important to keep in mind that these tribal people already have their own form of religion and are very devout in their beliefs. For example, they truly believe that twins are evil and these babies must be left to die. The Christians, on the other hand, believe this is ignorance on the part of the natives and save the babies when they find them discarded in the Evil Forest.



The first pastor of the church in Okonkwo's village realizes that he must be understanding of the natives' beliefs, but at the same time try to convince them of the folly in their thoughts. For this reason the people respect Mr. Brown. He spends time with the natives and discourages his followers from acting with too much zealousness. He befriends the leader of the village and the two discuss religion, each seeking to learn from the other. Because of his policy of mutual respect and compromise, Mr. Brown was able to persuade many of the village families to let their children attend school.

Relations between the tribe and the Christians deteriorate when Mr. Brown is forced to leave for health reasons and Reverend Smith takes charge. He does not agree that the Christians should allow the tribe members to hold onto any of their old beliefs. He sees things only in shades of black and white. It is mostly because of his intolerance of the beliefs of the native people that relations become so bad between the Christians and the natives.

Women's Roles

One specific thing to notice in this section of the novel is the way that women in Okonkwo's tribe are treated. First of all, women are considered to be property of the men. Each man has multiple wives. The number of wives sometimes determine the man's standing in the clan. Women are expected to be subservient, and they wait on their husband as he asks. The women are also in charge of cooking and raising the children. Interestingly, instead of being jealous of one another or competitive, these women seem to get along well with each other as they help one another and share duties.



Styles

Point of View

This novel is told from the third person point of view of an omniscient narrator. It is also told in the past tense, focusing mostly on Okonkwo and his family members. As the book tells the story of how the different characters of the novel slowly change their views on certain ideas through the years, it would be impossible to convey this idea if the story were told only through the view of one person. With the third person point of view, the reader is able to get a glimpse into the mind of Nwoye to understand why he decides to become a Christian, and also a look into the mind of Okonkwo to understand why Nwoye's decision to become a Christian angers him so badly.

Time passes quickly in the beginning few chapters of the novel with the author giving a run down of the life that Okonkwo's father led and how it has influenced Okonkwo. In this portion of the novel, the author also shares how Okonkwo has gone about impressing the people of his village and has gotten to the point that he has despite the bad start his father gave him. After the story catches up to the time that Okonkwo has married his wives and constructed his complex, time seems to move at a moderate pace with no periods where the time jumps quickly ahead. The periods of Okonkwo's life are neatly divided by the three parts of the book with his time before his flight to his motherland described in the first part, his time in his mother's homeland described in the second part of the book and the time when he returns to his home village detailed in the third part of the book.

Language and Meaning

The sentence style in this book is interesting and fitting for the topic as it, like Okonkwo's style, is very short and blunt. The language is not flowery or poetic but very basic and simple. The majority of the story is told in exposition with the author telling what has happened to Okonkwo, his family and his village in a very informational manner. Time is taken to expound upon the rituals and beliefs of the people but again, these ideas are presented with very little emotion.

As this book talks about tribes of people who live in Nigeria, there are several words that do not translate out of the native tongue into English. These include the term *ogbanje*, the term used to describe a child that continues to die and be reborn, and *Kotma*, the term that the villagers use to describe the court messengers.

Structure

The novel is divided into three different parts. The first part has thirteen chapters while the second and third parts both have six chapters. About sixty percent of the novel is

accounted for in the first part while the second and third parts account for about twenty percent of the novel each.

The first part covers Okonkwo's life up to the point that he is forced to take refuge in his mother's homeland when he accidentally kills a boy. The second part of the novel covers Okonkwo's time in his mother's homeland. The third part begins when Okonkwo returns to Umuofia and ends with his death.

The story is told in a linear fashion with few flashbacks. The only flashbacks are included are at the beginning of the novel. These are presented in the form of information rather than traditional flashbacks. These "flashbacks" are mainly found at the beginning of the novel where the reader is given information about Okonkwo's father. One of Okonkwo's wives also has one of the "flashbacks" where she thinks back to the time when she first saw Okonkwo fight.



Quotes

And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families.

-- Obierika (Chapter 8 paragraph 26)

Importance: In a discussion with his friend Okonkwo, Obierika tells Okonkwo that he should not have taken part in the murder of Ikemefuna because it is for actions like this one that the gods and goddess punish entire families.

In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week.

-- Narrator (Chapter 4 paragraph 17)

Importance: Okonkwo is punished for beating his wife during the Week of Peace even though his wife was the one at fault in the incident. It was against the laws of the village to say a cruel word to anyone in the village during this week.

Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father.

-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph 12)

Importance: This quote sums up the basics of Okonkwo's drive to be successful. He has lived his life in the shadow of his lazy father and has had to work for all that he has. He lives in fear of having the same reputation as his father.

With a father like Unoka, Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men had. He neither inherited a barn nor a title, nor even a young wife. But in spite of these disadvantages, he had begun even in his father's lifetime to lay the foundations of a prosperous future.

-- Narrator (Chapter 3 paragraph 9)

Importance: Since Okonkwo's father was lazy, he did not inherit a prosperous farm as some young men did. Instead, he had to work to earn all that he had but even before his father had passed away, Okonkwo has already begun to build up a successful yam crop.

Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength. He therefore treated Ikemefuna as he treated everybody else — with a heavy hand. But there was no doubt that he liked the boy. Sometimes when he went to big village meetings or communal ancestral feasts he allowed Ikemefuna to accompany him, like a son, carrying his stool and his goatskin bag. And, indeed, Ikemefuna called him father.

-- Narrator (Chapter 4 paragraph 7)



Importance: Even though Okonkwo does not readily show emotion, it is obvious that he likes Ikemefuna, the boy who has been put in his care after he was taken from a neighboring village for restitution for the murder of Udo's wife.

As soon as his father walked in, that night, Nwoye knew that Ikemefuna had been killed, and something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow.
-- Narrator (Chapter 7 paragraph 29)

Importance: Okonkwo's killing of Ikemefuna is one of the things that puts a wedge between Okonkwo and his son, Nwoye.

At last the man was named and people sighed 'E-u-u, Ezeudu is dead.' A cold shiver ran down Okonkwo's back as he remembered the last time the old man had visited him.
-- Narrator (Chapter 13 paragraph 2)

Importance: Okonkwo is disturbed as he thinks of Ezeudu's death because he remembers the last time he saw the man he was warning him not to take part in Ikemefuna's murder.

In the center of the crowd a boy lay in a pool of blood. It was the dead man's sixteen-year-old son, who with his brothers and half-brothers had been dancing the traditional farewell to their father. Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart.
-- Narrator (Chapter 13 paragraph 11)

Importance: This section describes the accident that results in Okonkwo and his family having to flee from the village and seek refuge in his mother's homeland.

When the will of the goddess had been done, he sat down in his obi and mourned his friend's calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently?
-- Narrator (Chapter 13 paragraph 16)

Importance: After Okonkwo and his family flee from the village, Obierika thinks about how unfair it was that his friend had to leave all that he had worked so hard for because of an accident.

He had called the first child born to him in exile Nneka — 'Mother is Supreme' — out of politeness to his mother's kinsmen. But two years later when a son was born he called him Nwofia — 'Begotten in the Wilderness.'
-- Narrator (Chapter 19 paragraph 2)

Importance: Okonkwo names his first child in honor of his mother's people and the gratefulness that he feels for them taking him in. When his next child is born, he names it in accordance with his real feelings about his time of refuge in his mother's homeland.



A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master.
-- One of the oldest members of the umunna (Chapter 19 paragraph 24)

Importance: In his farewell speech to Okonkwo, this member of his mother's tribe tells Okonkwo how much he fears for the younger generation because they are now allowed to abandon their families and curse their gods.

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 put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.
-- Obierika (Chapter 20 paragraph 26)

Importance: It is from this quote that the book takes its title. Obierika blames the white man, and the gullibility of the members of his clan, for allowing the ideas and customs to be torn apart that have held the clan together for so long.

Neither of them succeeded in converting the other but they learned more about their different beliefs.
-- Narrator (Chapter 21 paragraph 5)

Importance: Mr. Brown, the first missionary who leads in church in Umuofia is civil in his attempt to tell the natives about his religious beliefs. During their conversations, Mr. Brown and the village leaders exchange information about their individual beliefs.

It was Enoch who touched off the great conflict between church and clan in Umuofia which had been gathering since Mr. Brown left.
-- Narrator (Chapter 22 paragraph 6)

Importance: After the kind-hearted, understanding Mr. Brown is replaced by a new missionary, the clan members and the missionaries begin a conflict that begins to grow and is magnified with an action by Enoch.

Enoch had killed an ancestral spirit, and Umuofia was thrown into confusion.
-- Narrator (Chapter 22 paragraph 9)

Importance: It is in this statement that it is explained what Enoch did that caused such a stir between the missionaries' church and the leaders of the village.

That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog...." He could not say any more. His voice trembled and choked his words.
-- Obierika (Chapter 25 paragraph 18)

Importance: Obierika tries to make the District Commissioner what a terrible thing that



Okonkwo has been forced to do because of the changes that these politicians have made in their village and their way of life.

The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading.

-- District Commissioner (Chapter 25 paragraph 22)

Importance: Although Okonkwo is a greater man than the District Commissioner realizes, the only thing that he considers about Okonkwo is that his death would be a good snippet to include in the book that he was writing.