

Things Fall Apart Summary and Analysis of Chapters 1-5

Chapter 1

Summary:

We are introduced to [Okonkwo](#), a great man among the Igbo tribe, well known in the nine villages and beyond. In his youth, he became famous when he defeated Amalinze the Cat, a great wrestler. He is a formidable man, stern and intimidating in appearance; when angry, he stammers. The stammer makes him angrier, and he uses his fists. He has a hot temper. He has no patience for unsuccessful men; his father had been such a man. His father, a man by the name of [Unoka](#), was a lazy do-nothing, who has died deep in debt. The narrator digresses to tell us about Unoka. Unoka was a great flute player in his youth, but he became a failure as an adult. He was constantly borrowing from his friends and neighbors, and his children and wife did not have enough to eat. One day, a neighbor of Unoka, a man named Okoye, came to discuss the money Unoka owed him. The rituals of hospitality are described; the guest brings kola, a kind of food eaten during visits, and the men often speak in proverbs. Okoye was about take the third-highest title in the land, and he needed to collect resources. Unoka laughed him off, telling him that he had many other debts he needed to pay first.

Unoka dies deep in debt. But Okonkwo, though young, is already a great man. He has two barns full of yams, and he has fought bravely in two inter-tribal wars. He has taken two titles already. He has three wives. The narrator tells us that his high standing was the reason he was trusted to watch over the doomed boy who was sacrificed to Umuofia to avoid war. The doomed boy was named [Ikemefuna](#).

Analysis:

[Things Fall Apart](#) is part tragedy and part documentary. It is the story of Okonkwo and his tragic death after the coming of the white man; it is also a piece of fiction that documents the world that the white man destroyed. Structure is important to tragedy, and by Aristotle's rules of tragedy all that is inessential to the central action should be removed. However, the tragedy of Okonkwo's death is seen as part of a greater tragedy: the defeat and forced transformation of a great people. **Achebe's novel is both tragedy and memory.** The narrative tends to digress; to understand the gravity of Okonkwo's tragedy, the reader must see him within the context of his world.

Achebe gives us detailed descriptions of Igbo traditions, customs, and beliefs. Memory is an important theme; here, this study guide uses memory as a broad term covering all documentary-style descriptions of Igbo life. By the end of the novel, the reader realizes that the account he has just read is the story of a culture that has been irrevocably transformed. **Another part of Achebe's project is to give a balanced and sensitive portrait of Igbo culture, as African tribal cultures were long dismissed by white scholars as barbaric and evil.**

Digression is one of Achebe's most important tools. He takes any opportunity he can to tell us about a past incident which is only indirectly connected to his central story. These digressions allow him to flesh out his portrait of tribal life.

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