

# Things Fall Apart Background Notes



## Chinua Achebe Biography (1930-)

- Born in Nigeria, a member of the Ibo tribe
- Though he was raised within the traditions of the Ibo people, Achebe was also raised by Westernized parents who raised him as a Christian.
- At college, Achebe rejected his Christian name, Albert, and took the Ibo name Chinua.
- Achebe's work embraces the idea at the heart of African oral tradition that "art is, and always was, at the service of man. Our ancestors created their myths and told their stories for a human purpose." As a result, Achebe believes that "any good story, any good novel, should have a message, should have a purpose."
- Is credited with being the first Nigerian (and perhaps African) author to "successfully transmute the conventions of the novel, a European art form, into African literature."<sup>1</sup>
- Many people argue that Achebe should have won the Nobel Prize for Literature, but he never did.

## Techniques Used in *Things Fall Apart*

- Use of the language and **aphorisms** of oral culture
  - Achebe's goal is to blend the rhythms and patterns of African oral tradition with English, arguing that "'English of the African will have to be a new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings."
    - His language "displays a process by which the language is made to bear the weight and texture of a different experience. In doing so it becomes another language."
    - Desire to use English as a means to tell the stories of African people, in the manner of African storytellers
    - **Elevated diction** of the Ibo people—to contrast with earlier **pidgin** representations and to give a sense of a foreign language within English.
- Frequent use of **proverbs**, **folktales**, and **religious tenets** conveyed through prayer, speeches and song sequences.
  - "proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten."
- Narrative voice is somewhat detached
- Connection to nature. Natural connections and names are used to establish the connection of the Ibo people to the natural world.
- Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka has described *Things Fall Apart* as "the first novel in English which spoke from the interior of the African character, rather than portraying the African as an exotic, as the white man would see him."

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<sup>1</sup> King, Bruce. [Introduction to Nigerian Literature](#).

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## Achebe's Critique of European Vision

- Desire to Promote African Culture and Aesthetics
  - "African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and above all they had dignity." -Chinua Achebe
  - Achebe's work seeks to demonstrate the beauty of African values and culture, separate from colonial influence.
- Achebe argued in 1975 that European attempts to write about Africa were nothing more than, ""the need—in Western psychology to set up Africa as a foil to Europe""<sup>2</sup>
- In particular, Achebe criticized Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Joyce Cary's Mister Johnson.
  - "Africa as a setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as a human factor... Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break up of one petty European mind? But that is not even the point. The real question is the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world. And the question is whether a novel which celebrates this dehumanization... can be called a great work of art. My answer is: No it cannot."<sup>3</sup>
  - The novel's title was inspired by the William Butler Yeats poem "The Second Coming"
- Achebe's goal is two-fold: 1) to tell the Western world that African culture has value, and 2) to remind Africans of the importance of their own cultural traditions.

*"...only the story...can continue beyond the war and the warrior.*

*It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters.*

*It is the story...that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars  
into the spikes of the cactus fence.*

*The story is our escort; without it, we are blind.*

*Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story;  
rather it is the story that owns us and directs us.*

*-Chinua Achebe, Anthills of the Savannah*

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<sup>2</sup> Achebe, Chinua. "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness." Heart of Darkness A Norton Critical Edition. Ed Robert Kimbrough. New York: Norton, 1988: 251-262.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid