

## ***Things Fall Apart* Oral Presentation**

Name:

“The last four or five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and Africans in very lurid terms. The reason for this had to do with the need to justify the slave trade and slavery.... This continued until the Africans themselves, in the middle of the twentieth century, took into their own hands the telling of their story.”

—Chinua Achebe, “An African Voice,” *The Atlantic*

In a group no larger than four people, choose one of the following topics and put together an intelligent Google Drive presentation of 5-10 minutes in which you and your partner(s) analyze the novel and help members of our class appreciate the novel’s impact and meaning more fully. In other words, illuminate the novel for those who have already read it.

### **Requirements:**

1. The goal of your analysis is to illuminate the novel’s impact and meaning for your audience. Everything you say about the novel—from generalizations to specific, textual details—should be clearly relevant to that goal.
2. Support the main claims in your presentation by incorporating specific textual evidence and key quotations to illustrate the truth of your ideas. Apply your skills of close-textual-analysis to the novel and to your chosen topic.
3. Share the responsibilities (including analysis, research, writing, and speaking) equally with your partner(s).
4. Feel free to research outside sources; just make sure that you properly cite the sources of any information that you incorporate through parenthetical citations and a Works Cited list.
5. Presentations are due this Thursday. Save your presentation in your **APEngLit folder** in Google Drive, and also be ready to submit it to turnitin.com.

### **Topics:**

1. Conflicts over Values and Change in Ibo Society – Traditional indigenous societies are often thought (by Westerners) to be generally free of internal conflicts about values, and to be fixed and essentially unchanging over time. Which aspects of the Ibo society depicted in *Things Fall Apart* seem to resist those assumptions? Why are these aspects of Ibo society of central importance to the larger story and its impact?
2. Two Forms of Government & Law – When Europeans arrive in Okonkwo’s village, one result is a new kind of government and a new kind of law. How are the government and law of the Ibo people portrayed in the novel before Europeans arrive, and how do the new legal and governmental practices and institutions differ from those that preceded them? Are the changes good, bad, or something more complicated, and why?
3. Manliness – Okonkwo’s self-understanding is deeply bound up with his need to affirm and protect what he thinks of as his “manliness.” What are the main features of Okonkwo’s view of masculinity, and how are Okonkwo’s views of gender roles different from other characters’ views of gender roles? Ultimately, why are Okonkwo’s views of gender central to the outcome and meaning of his story?
4. Women – What should we make of the role of women in the novel? Are the female characters just dispensable appendages of the male characters in the story? Ultimately, why are the women in the novel central to the novel’s outcome and meaning?

5. Obierika as Foil – Okonkwo’s friend Obierika is described as “a man who thought about things.” What does Obierika think about, and how does that reflection ultimately put him at odds with Okonkwo? How does Obierika function as a character foil for Okonkwo? For example, how does Obierika question community traditions that Okonkwo follows blindly?

6. The Title Allusion – Discuss the importance of the novel’s title and Achebe’s *allusion* to Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming.” Discuss not only how the poem works and what it suggests/means, but also the multiple ways in which Achebe’s allusion to the poem is central to the novel’s impact and meaning? What significant illuminations and ironies emanate from Achebe’s allusion?

7. Tragedy – Illumination through Loss

The concept of *tragedy* originated in ancient Greece. In ancient Greece, a tragedy told the story of a person of great stature and character who experiences a serious downfall in the course of the story—a downfall that arouses both fear and pity in the audience. Typically, a *tragic* hero is a person of great stature or character who is brought down by an overwhelming conflict, or through what the Greeks called *hamartia*—i.e., the character’s own human imperfection or weakness (or what certain English critics later called the “tragic flaw”). Moreover, for the ancient Greeks, *hubris* (or improper pride) was sometimes involved in the hero’s tragic downfall. Explain how *Things Fall Apart* can be understood as a tragedy, and why Okonkwo can be viewed as a “tragic hero.” Which aspects of the novel make it a tragedy, and how do Okonkwo’s downfall and death contribute to your understanding of the novel and its meaning? Is Okonkwo responsible for his fate in this novel, or is his fate determined by outside forces beyond his control? What can we learn from Okonkwo’s downfall and death?

8. A New, Alternative Portrayal of African People & Culture – In *English and the African Writer*, Achebe writes that his work represents “a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language.” What features of *Things Fall Apart* embody this ambition? Do they help or hinder Achebe’s attempt to make the world depicted in the novel accessible to a broad audience? Moreover, in what ways does Achebe use *Things Fall Apart* as a means of expressing and commenting on history? To what extent is *Things Fall Apart* successful in communicating an alternative narrative to the dominant Western history of missionaries in Africa and other colonized societies?

9. Scenes of Violence

It has been said that in great literature, no scene of violence is included for its own sake; in other words, any scene of violence in a great literary work is present because it is essential to the work’s impact and meaning. What are the important scenes of violence in *Things Fall Apart*, and how do they contribute to the impact and meaning of the novel? Which scenes of violence involve significant parallels or similarities, and which scenes of violence set up meaningful contrasts?

10. White Colonizers – Discuss Achebe’s portrayal of the white colonizers in the novel. When and how is the white man introduced, and how do the Ibo people respond to the arrival and settlement of the white man? How does Achebe use incidents to paint the general character of the white colonizers? What attitudes toward the Ibo people do the white men bring, and how do their attitudes determine their treatment of the Ibo people? How does Achebe use incidents to paint the general character of the white colonizers? What is the role of the missionaries in the novel? Compare and contrast Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith. What do these characters represent? What do you make of their names? What about the District Commissioner—why does this white man get *the last word* in the novel?

11. Dual Religions – Discuss the importance of religion in *Things Fall Apart*. What seems to be Achebe’s attitude toward the traditional religion of the Ibo people? Moreover, what seems to be Achebe’s attitude

toward the religion brought by the missionaries? Why do some people convert to Christianity in the book and others do not? How would different characters in the novel answer this question differently?

12. Fear – Fear is pervasive throughout the novel. How does fear affect the actions of Okonkwo? Of Nwoye? How does fear influence Okonkwo's relationship with others?

13. Good vs. Evil? – Achebe does not paint a clear view of good versus evil in either the Igbo culture or colonialism. How does Achebe show value in both systems?

14. The narrative point of view of the novel—How does the author's chosen point of view contribute to our understanding of Okonkwo? Of the conflicting cultures in the novel? What techniques does the narrator use to evoke a participatory role for the reader?

15. You may invent your own topic, which can be any variation of “the importance of \_\_\_\_\_ in *Things Fall Apart*”

- Choose any other specific aspect of the novel OR a unique angle of vision into the novel to help us understand it better. (This topic could be Achebe's characterization of a particular character, a specific motif, a pair of character foils, an apparently small detail of the story that illuminates the story's impact and meaning, etc.)
- You might discuss an interesting motif (or patterned repetition) of a word, idea, concept, or even recurring image in the story—whether the ideas and images are similar/parallel, or whether they are opposing / antithetical. Or, you may notice interesting numbers present in the story—for example, things/characters presented in twos, or things/characters presented in threes. How does an awareness of these elements illuminate the story for you or contribute to your understanding of its form and meaning?
- Many novels are filled with *twos* and *threes*, informed by multiple *dualities* and *triples*. Discuss the role and significance of one specific duality or triple within the novel.
- Describe the Ibo concept of *chi* and how the concept relates to Okonkwo's desired success in life.
- Wrestling is a recurring image. In addition to the literal match at the beginning of the novel, what are other examples of the theme of wrestling and how do they contribute to the overall theme?
- moral ambiguity—whether in characters or in societies
- the theme of fundamentalism or fanaticism—i.e., unquestioning or rigid adherence to a culture's traditions, values, or beliefs; implementing laws too literally or single-mindedly; etc.
- any other dichotomy or antithesis that is central to the story
- duality – the two-sided nature of reality and truth
- the theme of tradition & continuity (connection with the past, with one's ancestors, with the values of one's culture, etc.)
- the *structure* of the narrative – The novel is structured in three parts. What do the divisions reflect about the stages of life of Okonkwo? How do the divisions also move toward and illustrate the collapse of Ibo society?
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