



**MOUNT NOTRE DAME**  
*Empowering Young Women*

AP WORLD HISTORY MODERN  
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SUMMER WORK 2021

Hello! Welcome to AP World History Modern (aka WHAP)!

Our summer reading this year is *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. You will need to get your hands on a copy of this novel and there are many options (Amazon for a hard copy or Kindle version, the Cincinnati library, Joseph Beth Booksellers, Half Price Books, etc.) If you need help obtaining a book, please let me know (Jen Faber [jfaber@mndhs.org](mailto:jfaber@mndhs.org) )

Amazon <https://www.amazon.com/Things-Fall-Apart-Chinua-Achebe/dp/0385474547>

You will be expected to have read the novel, in its entirety, by the time we return to school in August. I've also included here a brief intro to the book and some questions to consider as you read. Please make notes as you go through the book and have those notes available in class when we meet the first day. You will also be required to submit an essay about the novel, due the second day of class (the second day that our class meets.) You will find the questions and prompt below.

## INTRODUCTION

*Things Fall Apart* is acclaimed as the finest novel written about life in Nigeria at the end of the nineteenth century. Published in 1958, it is unquestionably the world's most widely read African novel, having sold more than eight million copies in English and been translated into fifty languages. But it offers far more than access to pre-colonial Nigeria and the cataclysmic changes brought about by the British. It also can be a window into the story of the Aborigines in Australia, the Maori of New Zealand, and the First Nations of North, Central, and South America in the "falling apart" of the indigenous cultures of these and other places whose centers could not hold.

Chinua Achebe is the ideal teller of this story, born in Nigeria in 1930 and growing up in the Igbo town of Ogidi. He spoke Igbo at home and studied English in school, imbibing the dual culture. In an autobiographical essay, he describes his childhood as being "at the crossroads of cultures." In the course of a distinguished academic and literary career, much of it in exile, Achebe has been the recipient of many awards, beginning with the Margaret Wrong Memorial Prize in 1959 for *Things Fall Apart* and including more than thirty honorary doctorates. Achebe is in great demand throughout the world as a speaker and visiting lecturer, and is presently teaching at Bard College in New York.



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Achebe uses that most English of literary forms, the novel, to make his story accessible to Westerners, and interlaces the narrative with Igbo proverbs and folktales. The novel challenges Western notions of historical truth, and prods readers into questioning our perception of pre-colonial and colonial Africa. More than half the novel is devoted to a depiction of Igbo culture, artfully drawn as we follow the rise to eminence of the protagonist. As a champion wrestler and a great warrior, Okonkwo is a natural leader. His flaw, however, is that he never questions the received wisdom of his ancestors. For this reason he is not drawn in a flattering light, but his culture is given a full and fair depiction.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The title of the novel comes from a line in *The Second Coming* by William Butler Yeats. Read this poem and apply it to the breakdown of African society as described in the novel.

### THE SECOND COMING

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep



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Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come at last,  
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

1. Describe the setting (time, place, culture) of the novel. Attend to Achebe's presentation of the details of everyday village lifeways in Umuofia, the values and beliefs of the Igbo people, and the importance of ritual, ceremony, social hierarchy, and personal achievement in Igbo culture. How is social life organized? What are the important celebrations? What is the role of war, of religion, and of the arts? What is the role of the individual in relation to the community of Umuofia? Compare /contrast Igbo lifeways, customs, perspectives, beliefs, and values to those of your own culture.
2. Family Life: Examine family life and living arrangements in Okonkwo's home. Describe Okonkwo's relationships to his wives and children, especially to Ekwefi, Ezinma, and Nwoye. What differing roles and functions do men and women have in Igbo society? Paul Briens points out "that it is women who are chiefly responsible for decorating the houses. In many African cultures they are also the chief domestic architects, and the mud walls are shaped by them into pleasing patterns." What is Okonkwo's attitude toward women? In this polygamous culture, men may take more than one wife and each household is enclosed in a compound. Review the section on "Igbo Marriage Customs," pp. xxx-xxxii. Each wife lives in a hut with her children, and the husband visits each wife in turn, though he has his own hut as well. Children are often cared for more or less communally—another African proverb states, "It takes a village to raise a child." Compare/contrast the advantages and disadvantages of this social structure to our own family arrangements in the U.S.
3. How are white men first introduced into the story? Why might Africans suppose that they have no toes? What sorts of attitudes do the Africans express about white men?
4. Even as Achebe works to educate his readers about African culture and to combat demeaning stereotypes, he does not present Igbo society as ideal or perfect. The portrait of this culture on the eve of its "falling apart" in Part I of *Things Fall Apart* is complex, sometimes contradictory and critical. What aspects of pre-colonial Igbo culture does Achebe seem to question or criticize? How does Achebe use characters like Obierika, Okonkwo, and Nwoye to offer such social criticism of Igbo society? How do the people of Umuofia react to change?



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5. Describe your initial reading experience and response(s) to *Things Fall Apart* as a cross-cultural encounter: how are you responding to this exposure to traditional Igbo culture and people? Why do you think you are responding as you are? What seems most different and/or foreign to you? What seems most similar and/or familiar to you?
6. 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?
7. What holds a culture together? What tears a culture apart? What role does change play in the functioning of a people and culture? If an outside force threatens our culture, do we have the right/responsibility to respond with violence? Should change come only from within, or is it only possible from an individual or group arriving from the outside? Do we cling to traditions of the past for fear of the future? Is change destructive or progressive? How so?

NOW THAT YOU'VE FINISHED READING *THINGS FALL APART*, HOW AND WHY DID THINGS FALL APART?

## WRITING ASSIGNMENT

### DUE THE SECOND CLASS PERIOD

After reading the book, please compose an essay in response to the prompt below. Your essay **MUST** contain an introduction with a thesis statement, evidence in body paragraphs and a conclusion. (\*Don't be afraid of this assignment!! The idea here is to get you thinking and writing about these ideas BEFORE we start class in August.)

#### ESSAY PROMPT:

Achebe takes the title for his novel from a line in a classic Western modernist poem "The Second Coming" (wr. 1919; pub. 1921), by William Butler Yeats (1865-1939; Irish). Paul Brians explains the background of Yeats' poem: "Yeats was attracted to the spiritual and occult world and fashioned for himself an elaborate mythology to explain human experience. 'The Second Coming,' written after the catastrophe of World War I and with communism and fascism rising, is a compelling glimpse of an inhuman world about to be born. Yeats believed that history in part moved in two thousand-year cycles. The Christian era, which followed that of the ancient world, was about to give way to an ominous period represented by the rough, pitiless beast in the poem." Read "The Second Coming" (below) and consider why Achebe might choose to take the title of his novel from Yeats' poem. Consider how Achebe's literary allusion to Yeats' poem



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might deepen or extend—by comparison and/or contrast—the meaning(s) of Achebe’s title and his novel.

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