

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

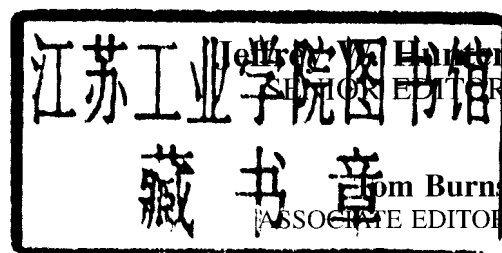
CLC

152

Volume 152

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 76-46132
ISBN 0-7876-5852-9
ISSN 0091-3421
Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

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CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967), 211-51; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 223-26.

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Things Fall Apart

Chinua Achebe

(Full name Albert Chinualumogu Achebe) Nigerian novelist, essayist, poet, short story writer, and children's writer.

The following entry presents criticism on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). For further information on his life and works, see *CLC* Volumes 1, 3, 5, 7, 11, 26, 51, 75, and 127.

INTRODUCTION

Things Fall Apart (1958) is one of the most widely read and studied African novels ever written. Critics have viewed the work as Achebe's answer to the limited and often inaccurate presentation of Nigerian life and customs found in literature written by powers of the colonial era. Achebe does not paint an idyllic picture of pre-colonial Africa, but instead shows Igbo society with all its flaws as well as virtues. The novel's title is taken from W. B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming."

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

Things Fall Apart traces life in the Igbo village of Umuofia, Nigeria, just before and after its initial contact with European colonists and their Christian religion. The novel focuses on Okonkwo, an ambitious and inflexible clan member trying to overcome the legacy of his weak father. The clan does not judge men on their father's faults, and Okonkwo's status is based on his own achievements. He is a great wrestler, a brave warrior, and a respected member of the clan who endeavors to uphold its traditions and customs. He lives for the veneration of his ancestors and their ways. Okonkwo's impetuosity and rigidity, however, often pit him against the laws of the clan, as when he beats his wife during the Week of Peace. The first part of the novel traces Okonkwo's successes and failures within the clan. In the second part he is finally exiled when he shoots at his wife and accidentally hits a clansman. According to clan law, his property is destroyed, and he must leave his father's land for seven years. He flees to his mother's homeland, which is just beginning to experience contact with Christian missionaries. Okonkwo is anxious to return to Umuofia, but finds upon his return—the third part of the novel—that life has also begun to change there as well. The Christian missionaries have made inroads into the culture of the clan through its disenfranchised members. Shortly after his return,



Okonkwo's own son leaves for the mission school, disgusted by his father's participation in the death of a boy that his family had taken in and treated as their own. Okonkwo eventually stands up to the missionaries in an attempt to protect his culture, but when he kills a British messenger, Okonkwo realizes that he stands alone, and kills himself. Ironically, suicide is considered the ultimate disgrace by the clan, and his people are unable to bury him.

MAJOR THEMES

The main theme of *Things Fall Apart* is the clash between traditional Igbo society and the culture and religion of the colonists. Achebe wrote the novel in English but incorpo-

rated into the prose a rhythm that conveyed a sense of African oral storytelling. He also used traditional African images including the harmattan (an African dust-laden wind) and palm oil, as well as Igbo proverbs. In an effort to show the clash between the two cultures, Achebe presented traditional Christian symbols and then described the clan's contrasting reactions to them. For instance, in Christianity, locusts are a symbol of destruction and ruin, but the Umuofians rejoice at their coming because they are a source of food. The arrival of the locusts comes directly before the arrival of the missionaries in the novel. Transition is another major theme of the novel and is expressed through the changing nature of Igbo society. Several references are made throughout the narrative to faded traditions in the clan, emphasizing the changing nature of its laws and customs. Colonization is a time of great transition in Umuofia and the novel focuses on Okonkwo's rigidity in the face of this change. Other themes include duality, the nature of religious belief, and individualism versus community.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Reviewers have praised Achebe's neutral narration and have described *Things Fall Apart* as a realistic novel. Much of the critical discussion about *Things Fall Apart* concentrates on the socio-political aspects of the novel, including the friction between the members of Igbo society as they are confronted with the intrusive and overpowering presence of Western government and beliefs. Ernest N. Emenyonu commented that "*Things Fall Apart* is indeed a classic study of cross-cultural misunderstanding and the consequences to the rest of humanity, when a belligerent culture or civilization, out of sheer arrogance and ethnocentrism, takes it upon itself to invade another culture, another civilization." One of the issues that critics have continued to discuss is whether Okonkwo serves as an embodiment of the values of Umuofia or stands in conflict with them. This discussion often centers around the question of Okonkwo's culpability in the killing of the boy, Ikemefuna. Many critics have argued that Okonkwo was wrong and went against the clan when he became involved in killing the boy. Other reviewers have asserted that he was merely fulfilling the command of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves. Several critics have compared *Things Fall Apart* to a Greek tragedy and Okonkwo to a tragic hero. Aron Aji and Kirstin Lynne Ellsworth have stated, "As numerous critics have observed, Okonkwo is at once an allegorical everyman figure embodying the existential paradoxes of the Igbo culture in transition, and a great tragic hero in the tradition of Oedipus, Antigone, and Lear." Some critics have complimented Achebe's choice to write in the language of the colonizers, lauding his artful use of the English language. Several reviewers have also noted his use of African images and proverbs to convey African culture and oral storytelling. Arlene A. Elder has asserted, "Achebe's use of proverbial language enhances the richness of *Things Fall Apart*, and the author points out that '[a]mong the Igbo the art of conversation is

regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten.'"

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Things Fall Apart (novel) 1958
No Longer at Ease (novel) 1960
The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories (short stories) 1962
Arrow of God (novel) 1964
Chike and the River (juvenilia) 1966
A Man of the People (novel) 1966
Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems (poetry) 1973
Morning Yet on Creation Day (essays) 1975
The Trouble with Nigeria (essays) 1983
Anthills of the Savannah (novel) 1987
The Voter (novel) 1994
Another Africa (poetry and essays) 1997
Conversations with Chinua Achebe (interviews) 1997
Home and Exile (novel) 2000

CRITICISM

Jeffrey Meyers (essay date 1969)

SOURCE: "Culture and History in *Things Fall Apart*," in *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1969, pp. 25–32.

[In the following essay, Meyers discusses Achebe's presentation of both the positive and negative elements of tribal society in *Things Fall Apart*.]

The novels of Chinua Achebe, the best of the new generation of West Africans writing in English,¹ begin with the coming of the white man to the bush and end in contemporary Lagos, and show the process of moral and cultural disintegration that results from colonialism. The novels reveal the changing perspectives of each succeeding generation, which have also been described by the Nigerian leader Awolowo before independence: "Our grandfathers with unbonded gratitude adored the British. . . . Our immediate fathers simply toed the line. We of today are critical, unappreciative, and do not feel that we owe any debt of gratitude to the British. The younger elements in our group are extremely cynical, and cannot understand why Britain is in Nigeria."² Achebe's first and best novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), re-interprets the European view of African culture and history prevalent since the zenith of imperialism. Basil Davidson declares that "Even within the last ten years the former Governor of Nigeria could write that 'for centuries, while all the pageant of history

swept by, the African remained unmoved—in primitive savagery’ . . . This belief that Africans had lived in universal chaos or stagnation . . . [was] exceedingly convenient in imperial times”³ and provided the necessary justification for conquest and exploitation. This historical view is still voiced today by such prominent men as Sir Alan Burns, former Governor-General of the Gold Coast and author of a standard history of Nigeria, who continues in the antiquated though unbroken tradition of Lugard’s pronouncement—“the Animism and Fetish of the pagan represent no system of ethics and no principles of conduct”⁴—and who asserts of pre-colonial Nigeria:

in the bad old days under tyrannical indigenous rulers the unfortunate peasants had no chance to cultivate their land properly and little opportunity to reap for their own benefit what they had sown. . . . Free men also suffered from the cruelty and rapacity of indigenous rulers. They were liable, at the whim of a chief or through the instigation of a fetish-priest, to indescribable tortures and brutal punishments. Trade was hampered by bad communications and the depredations of robbers and pirates who plundered and murdered peaceful traders. Tribal warfare caused much loss of life and destruction of property.⁵

The two corollaries of this historical misconception are Burns’ claim that “the inhabitants of these [African] territories as a whole stood aside during the fighting and willingly accepted British rule,” and the traditional “defense of colonies”—“At its lowest assessment British rule was the lesser of two evils.”⁶

We have put a stop to slavery and human sacrifice, we have checked the cruelty and corruption of indigenous rulers, we have stamped out certain diseases and reduced the incidence of others, we have brought a measure of education to people who were generally illiterate. We have developed backward countries by the construction of roads and railways, we have opened up mines and improved on the primitive agriculture of the past. We have allowed trade to develop under the protection of a firm administration.⁷

The patronizing and self-righteous speech of Achebe’s District Commissioner echoes Burns’ claim:

we have brought a peaceful administration to your people so that you may be happy. If any man ill-treats you we shall come to your rescue. But we will not allow you to ill-treat others. We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice *just as it is done in my own country* under a great queen.⁸

This speech illustrates the central defect of British rule: a cultural ethnocentrism that denies the validity, and even the existence, of African customs, law and morality. The DC employs court messengers who are both brutal and corrupt, and judges cases in total ignorance. He does not understand African customs, for, as one elder asks, “How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad” (p. 160).

One of the themes of this novel is the need for cultural relativity, which the Africans possess but the British lack. “What is good among one people is an abomination with

others” (p. 127), says one of the African leaders; and another elder states, “he does not understand our customs just as we do not understand his. We say he is foolish because he does not know our ways, and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not know his” (p. 172). This simple language expresses an important idea first expounded by Edmund Burke: that societies evolve organically, upon the basis of their own traditions and necessities, and that to impose alien institutions and controls undermines stability and the restraining force of the moral code.

The frustration and violence of the hero Okonkwo are a mute expression of what has been stated by the most eloquent African leaders and intellectuals. Nkrumah says that “The white man arrogated to himself the right to rule and to be obeyed by the non-white; his mission, he claimed, was to ‘civilise’ Africa. Under this cloak, the Europeans robbed the continent of vast riches and inflicted unimaginable suffering on the African people.”⁹ Mphahlele asserts that “Capitalist economy has for a long time now been battering on African traditions. Our traditional forms of communism and communal responsibility in which the land belongs to the people under the chief’s trusteeship, co-operative farming, and so on, are fast going.”¹⁰ And Kaunda declares that “The Western way of life has been so powerful that our own social, cultural and political set-up has been raped by the powerful and greedy Western civilization. . . . The result is . . . moral destruction.”¹¹

When asked about the moral view of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe replied: “I feel that this particular society had its good side—the poetry of the life; the simplicity, if you like; the communal way of sharing in happiness and in sorrow and in work and all that. It also had art and music. But it had this cruel side to it and it is this that I think helped to bring down my hero.”¹² There is a dichotomy, then, between the traditions, rituals and ceremonies of tribal life that Achebe celebrates with dignity and pride, and the cruelty that he narrates with honesty and restraint.

More than half the novel describes the life and customs of the clan, for as Achebe says, “I think I’m basically an ancestor worshipper; if you like. Not in the same sense as my grandfather would probably do it, pouring palm wine on the floor for the ancestors . . . With me it takes a form of a celebration, and I feel a certain compulsion to do this.”¹³ During the Feast of the New Yam, for example, he describes the woman who “set about painting themselves with cam wood and drawing beautiful black patterns on their stomachs and backs. The children were also decorated, especially their hair, which was shaved in beautiful patterns” (p. 34). Achebe celebrates the bonds of kinship in family life, the respectful and ceremonial visits, the worship of the ancestral spirits, the veneration of the Oracle and of the elders; the virgin’s confession, the arrangement of the bride price, the feasts of marriage, of harvest, and of farewell; the singing, the drumming, the dancing and the wrestling; the village councils and oratory, the courts of justice and the last rites for the dead.

The proverbs and folk tales that richly endow the novel represent the very essence of cultural traditions and homely wisdom, for "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (p. 6).

But tribal life is not entirely idyllic. Human heads are captured in war, the diseased are abandoned to their solitary death agonies in the Evil Forest, slaves are kept, human being are sacrificed, twins are murdered and babies are mutilated. It is this cruel side of tribal life that drives the sensitive Nwoye, Okonkwo's oldest son, out of the clan and into the church:

The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul—the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth (p. 134).

Despite these cruelties, the fundamental and intrinsic belief that "the law of the land must be obeyed" (p. 63) underlies every aspect of this tribal life. Offenses against the moral sanctions of the law inevitably lead to tragedy, and are committed by Okonkwo, by the entire clan and by the white missionaries and their followers.

Okonkwo is the ambitious and impetuous son of a weak and indolent father. He is a great wrestler, a brave warrior, an industrious worker and a respected leader, who venerates the ancient customs and glories of his people. "He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women" (p. 165). Okonkwo's offenses against the law magnify and intensify as the novel progresses, and his destructive path leads from disturbing the week of peace and shooting at his wife, to participating in the sacrifice of his adopted son Ikemefuna, accidentally killing a clansman, deliberately killing the messenger of the whites and finally hanging himself.

The central episode in these tragic events and the best scene in the novel is the death of Ikemefuna, who the Oracle suddenly declares must be sacrificed. Okonkwo is warned by his friend, "That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death" (p. 51), but he accompanies his clansmen into the forest where the sacrifice is to be performed. The music and dancing from a nearby village that the executioners hear suggests the mixture of good and evil, joy and terror in the world; and the "giant trees and climbers which perhaps had stood from the beginning of things, untouched by the axe and the bush-fire" (p. 53) symbolize the primitive element in the tribal customs that demands the slaughter of the innocent victim. Though Ikemefuna's cry, "My father, they have killed me!," recalls the last words of the crucified Christ, the sacrifice is a reenactment of the trial of Abraham and Isaac in the land of

Moriah (when Nwoye, Ikonkwo's son and Ikemefuna's adopted brother, converts, he takes the name of Isaac)—but without the intervention of a harsh but just God. "Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak" (p. 55).

The tragedy of the clan, like that of Okonkwo, begins with the sacrificial murder of Ikemefuna. It is followed by the murder of the first white man who unexpectedly appears on a bicycle; and then by the destruction of the mission church, which is provoked by the white missionaries and the British government that stands behind them.

The missionaries appear in the second part of the novel, while Okonkwo is in exile for the accidental murder of a clansman, and their insidious progress works like a subtle poison to undermine the solidarity of the tribe. They first attract the undesirables, oppose the animist gods, thrive in the Evil Forest despite its fatal reputation (and thereby enhance their own), rescue abandoned twins, admit the outcasts and destroy the sacred python. They then begin to attract more worthy men, divide the tribe, bring trade, prosperity and education, and sacrilegiously kill the ancestral spirits. Finally, the British arrest, humiliate and torture the leaders, and drive Okonkwo to murder and suicide.

Achebe's novel reflects the deliberate destructive policy of the missionaries who, writes James Coleman,

did not seek to preserve traditional society, but rather to transform it¹⁴. . . included among the preconditions for entry into the Christian fold [were] the abandonment of such customs as initiation ceremonies (a crucial phase in the African system of education), dancing (a vital part of the esthetic and recreational life of the African), marriage payment (a bond linking the families of the bride and the groom), polygyny (at the core of the entire African family system), secret societies (very often key institutions in the traditional political system), and ancestor worship (the symbol of community which linked the individual to a larger whole through time), not to mention so-called witch-doctoring, semi-nudity, African names, and traditional funeral ceremonies. . . . The main consequences of the early negative approach of missionaries were the undermining of parental authority, the weakening of traditional sanctions, the general alienation of Christian elements from the balance of the community, and the inculcation of disrespect for traditional cultures.¹⁵

When Okonkwo returns from his maternal village he finds the tribe in chaos and despair. "He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man's god" (p. 139).¹⁶ The unity of the tribe has been destroyed for "our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland. If we fight the stranger we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman" (p. 183). Okonkwo realizes that the white man "has put a knife on the things that held us

together and we have fallen apart" (p. 160). As he mourns for his friends and tribesmen, "It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming—its own death . . . All our gods are weeping . . . Our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes" (pp. 168, 182–83). In the midst of a futile clan meeting to decide what action should be taken against the whites, messengers appear to break up the gathering. While his tribesmen cower in fear and confusion, Okonkwo alone is capable of action. He restores his dignity as a man and a warrior by decapitating a messenger, though this violence and vengeance must lead to the final abomination of suicide.

Things Fall Apart, then, is about the destruction of a traditional culture and society after the impact of a more powerful western civilization and technology; and it is a celebration of and nostalgia for the virtues of that society, and a mourning for its extinction. This novel opposes Burns' materialistic views and demonstrates the existence, the beauty and the value of the African culture. It shows how the Africans opposed white domination, which, when forcibly established, was in many ways worse, not better, than pre-colonial life. Achebe's conservative vision represents African tradition. He recreates the vital rhythms of the ageless life in the bush, the animist religion and the popular feasts, that are the very sources of cultural and spiritual vitality in the life of the people. Achebe's book reveals that no amount of material progress and law and order can compensate for lack of liberty and personal dignity, a lack that degrades every aspect of personal, cultural, social and moral life.

Notes

1. See Achebe's "The English Language and the African Writer," *Moderna Språk* (Sweden), LVIII (Dec. 1964), 438–446, where he defends Africans' use of English as a common world language.
2. Quoted in James Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (Berkeley, 1958), p. 412.
3. Basil Davidson, *The Lost Cities of Africa* (Boston, 1959), pp. viii–ix.
4. Quoted in *The New Statesman*, LXX (9 July 1965), 56.
5. Sir Alan Burns, *In Defense of Colonies* (London, 1957), pp. 63, 67.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 42. Michael G. Smith, *Government in Zazzau* (Northern Nigeria) (Oxford, 1960), p. 199, refutes this view: "In 1897 British forces of the Royal Niger Company under the command of Sir George Goldie overpowered the Fulani kingdom of Nupe and overawed its neighbor, Ilorin." Josiah Kariuki, *Mau-Mau Detainee* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964), pp. 48–49, expresses the modern African viewpoint, now generally accepted in the West, when he writes of Kenya, "The Kikuyu rightly felt that their uneducated

forefathers had not understood the nature and implications of the requests forced on them by the early administrators and settlers, nor had they the weapons or power to refuse any demand that was pressed really hard."

7. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
8. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1958), p. 175. Italics mine. Subsequent page references will be cited in parentheses after the quotation.
9. Kwame Nkrumah, *I Speak of Freedom* (New York: Praeger, 1961), p. IX. Albert Schweitzer, *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest* (London: Fontana, 1961), p. 124, also criticizes the human and moral degradation of colonialism and asks, "Who can describe the injustice and the cruelties that in the course of centuries they have suffered at the hands of Europeans? . . . Anything we give them is not benevolence but atonement."
10. Ezekiel Mphahlele, *The African Image* (New York: Praeger, 1962), p. 21.
11. Kenneth Kaunda, *Zambia Shall Be Free* (London: Heinemann, 1962), p. 114.
12. Quoted in Louis Nkosi, "Some Conversations with African Writers," *Africa Report*, IX (July 1964), 19.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
14. Coleman, p. 91. A very progressive view, which opposes this policy, is expressed by Mary Kingsley, *West African Studies* (London, 1899), p. 383: "The knowledge of native laws, religion, institutions, and State-form would give you the knowledge of what is good in these things, so that you might develop and encourage them."
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 100.
16. See Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (London, 1964), pp. 104–105, 286: The chief priest laments, "there is no escape from the white man. . . . As daylight chases away darkness so will the white man drive away all our customs. . . . What could it point to but the collapse and ruin of all things? Then a god, finding himself powerless, might take to his heels."

Solomon O. Iyasere (essay date Spring 1974)

SOURCE: "Narrative Techniques in *Things Fall Apart*," in *New Letters*, Vol. 40, No. 3, Spring, 1974, pp. 73–93.

[In the following essay, Iyasere analyzes the complexity of the narrative technique in *Things Fall Apart*.]

No West African fiction in English has received as much critical attention as *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe's first and most impressive novel. In defending its impor-

tance, most critics link its value solely to its theme, which they take to be the disintegration of an almost Edenic traditional society as a result of its contact and conflict with Western practices and beliefs. These enthusiastic critics, such as Gleason and Killam, are primarily interested in the socio-cultural features of the work, and stress the historical picture of a traditional Ibo village community without observing how this picture is delimited, how this material serves the end of art. This approach, which cannot withstand critical scrutiny, does great violence to the text and denies it the artistic vitality they so vigorously claim for it.

Overemphasizing the ways in which Okonkwo represents certain values fundamental to the Umuofia society, Killam turns Okonkwo into an embodiment of the values of this society, averring, "Okonkwo was one of the greatest men of his time, the embodiment of Ibo values, the man who better than most symbolizes his race" (*The Novels of Chinua Achebe*, 17). Eustace Palmer, a moralistic critic, presents a similar interpretation but extends Okonkwo's role from champion to victim:

Okonkwo is what his society has made him, for his most conspicuous qualities are a response to the demands of his society. If he is plagued by fear of failure and of weakness it is because his society put such a premium on success. . . . Okonkwo is a personification of his society's values, and he is determined to succeed in this rat-race.

(*An Introduction to the African Novel*, 53)

The inaccuracies of this view derive from disregarding the particularities of the rhetoric of Achebe's controlled presentation. Killam and Palmer take as authoritative Okonkwo's vision of himself as a great leader and savior of Umuofia and so fail to realize that this vision is based on a limited perception of the values of that society. Nowhere in the novel is Okonkwo presented as either the embodiment or the victim of Umuofia's traditional laws and customs. To urge that he is either, as do Killam and Palmer, is to reduce the work to a sentimental melodrama, rob Okonkwo of his tragic stature, and deny the reader's sympathy for him.

More responsive to the novel's simultaneous sympathy for and critical judgment of Okonkwo, David Carroll observes:

As Okonkwo's life moves quickly to its tragic end, one is reminded forcibly of another impressive but wrong-headed hero, Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. They share in obsessive need for success and status, they subordinate all their private relations to this end, and both have an inability to understand the tolerant, skeptical societies in which their novel single-mindedness succeeds. . . . Viewed in the perspective of the Wessex, rustic way of life, Henchard is crass, brutal, and dangerous; but when this way of life as a whole is threatened with imminent destruction, then his fierce resistance takes on a certain grandeur. The reader's sympathy describes a similar trajectory as it follows Okonkwo's career. By the values of Umuofia

his inadequacies are very apparent; but when the alien religion begins to question and undermine these values, Okonkwo, untroubled by the heart-searching of the community, springs to its defense and acts.

(Chinua Achebe, 62-63)

Carroll's comment is to the point in directing our attention to the crucial limitations Okonkwo places on his relationship to and acceptance of Umuofia's standards. But simply focusing attention on this matter is not sufficient; we must see how Achebe is able to achieve this control of sympathy for Okonkwo.

Things Fall Apart seems a simple novel, but it is deceptively so. On closer inspection, we see that it is provocatively complex, interweaving significant themes: love, compassion, colonialism, achievement, honor, and individualism. In treating these themes, Achebe employs a variety of devices, such as proverbs, folktales, rituals, and the juxtaposition of characters and episodes to provide a double view of the Ibo society of Umuofia and the central character, Okonkwo. The traditional Ibo society that emerges is a complex one: ritualistic and rigid yet in many ways surprisingly flexible. In this society, a child is valued more than any material acquisition, yet the innocent, loving child, Ikemefuna, is denied love, denied life, by the rigid tribal laws and customs. Outwardly, Umuofia is a world of serenity, harmony, and communal activities but inwardly it is torn by the individual's personal doubts and fears. It is also a society in which "age was respected . . . but achievement was revered." It is this sustained view of the duality of the traditional Ibo society that the novel consistently presents in order to create and intensify the sense of tragedy and make the reader understand the dilemma that shapes and destroys the life of Okonkwo.

No episode reveals more dramatically the concomitant rigidity and flexibility of the society than the trial scene in which the domestic conflict between Uzowulu and his wife Mgbafo is settled. Uzowulu has beaten his wife so often and so severely that at last she has fled to her family for protection from him. While such conflicts are usually settled on a personal level, Uzowulu is the kind of man who will listen only to the judgement of the great *egwugwu*, the masked ancestor spirits of the clan. This ceremony proceeds with marked ritual (*Things Fall Apart* [hereafter cited as *TFA*] 85).

The ritualistic procedure of this event reflects the seriousness and formality with which the people of Umuofia deal with internal problems, even trivial ones, that undermine or threaten the peaceful coexistence of the clans. The stereotyped incantatory exchange of greeting, the ceremonious way in which the spirits appear, the ritual greeting, "Uzowulu's body, I salute you," and Uzowulu's response, "Our father, my hand has touched the ground," even the gestures of these masked spirits, define the formality of the society and dramatize the fact that the peace of the tribe as a whole takes precedence over personal considerations. The decrees of the gods are always carried out with

dispatch, even if it means a ruthless violation of human impulses, as in the murder of Ikemefuna or the throwing away of twins. But this formality does not preclude dialogue, probing, and debate, aptly demonstrated in that the parties involved in the conflict are allowed to present their opposing, even hostile views. The way this domestic issue is resolved reveals the unqualified emphasis the people of Umuofia place on harmony and peaceful coexistence (*TFA*, 89).

The formality of this event, the firmness with which the society controls impending disorder, becomes even more apparent when contrasted with the spontaneous communal feasting that precedes it—the coming of the locust. This sudden occurrence aptly demonstrates the joy and vitality of the society when it is not beleaguered by internal disharmony (*TFA*, 54–55).

The overabundance of locusts provides an equal measure of joy for Umuofia. While the people restrain themselves enough to heed the elders' instructions on how to catch the insects this control of happiness is momentary, and no one spares either time or effort in responding to this unexpected feast. For the moment, Umuofia is at peace; Okonkwo and his sons are united in sharing the joy which envelops the community. Against the joyfully harmonic rhythm of this event, the withdrawn, controlled formalism of the judgement of the *egwugwu* stands in sharp relief. By juxtaposing these events, Achebe orchestrates the modulating rhythms of Umuofia, the alternating patterns of spontaneous joy and solemn justice. This modulation of rhythms developed out of the juxtaposition contrasting events open as well within the framework of the same episode. The suddenness with which the locusts descend on the people, bringing joy, is matched by the suddenness with which that joy is taken away. The very moment that Okonkwo and his sons sit feasting, Ezeudu enters to tell Okonkwo of the decree of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves (*TFA*, 55–56).

Just as Okonkwo's response to the celebration of feasting is controlled by the almost simultaneous announcement of the doom of the innocent child, Ikemefuna, so the narrator modulates the reader's response to the contrasting values and customs of Umuofia. On the very day Ikemefuna sits happily with his "father," Ezeudu somberly states, "Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him."

Similarly, in order to articulate and call attention to the rigidity of the Ibo code of values in requiring the exile of Okonkwo for the inadvertent killing of Ezeudu's son, Achebe skillfully orchestrates the circumstances of the boy's death. In presenting this scene, Achebe emphasizes the atmosphere, the action, and the situation without individualizing Okonkwo's role. Such deliberate attention to the circumstances that day intensifies the sense of accidental occurrence. The death of Ezeudu's son comes as a result of the situation, of the circumstances, not as any

deliberate act on Okonkwo's part. With this sense of chance established, the scene makes more apparent the rigidity of the tribal laws in dealing with this accidental event:

The only course open for Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years.

(*TFA*, 117)

In probing and evaluating this code whose rigidity negates circumstantial and human considerations, the thoughtful Obierika questions, "Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently?"

Obierika's thoughts reflect the submerged fears of the village elders, particularly Uchendu, Okonkwo's uncle, and Ezeudu, as well as the doubts and questions of Okonkwo's wives and even his son Nwoye. Indeed, he gives voice to the very question the reader himself asks.

The inflexibility of this tribal code and its application is revealed not only in the formal decrees of the Oracles and the judgments of the *egwugwu* but also in the small details of every day life. The simple act of a cow getting loose in the fields is met with a harsh penalty (*TFA*, 108–109). Since the preservation of crops is essential in an agricultural society, the imposition of a severe fine on those whose animals destroy the produce is understandable. But the crucial point the narrator stresses here is that the laws are applied with absolute rigidity, with no regard for mitigating circumstances. Even though the responsible party in this instance was only a small child being watched by his father, who does not usually watch the children, while the mother was busy helping another prepare a feast to ensure the proper observance of the marriage ceremonies, the same penalty is exacted. Just as Okonkwo is harshly punished for an inadvertent act which occurred while he was observing the proper funeral rites of the clan, so is Ezelagbo's husband punished for an offense his small child committed both unintentionally and unknowingly. In these subtle ways, Achebe succeeds in presenting the inflexibility of the code of values of Umuofia as it responds to any threat, no matter how small, to the overall stability of the clan.

Yet to insist that this code is entirely inflexible is to present only one-half of the picture. The people of Umuofia can adapt their code to accommodate the less successful, even effeminate men, like Okonkwo's father, Unoka, despite the fact that according to their standards of excellence, solid personal achievement and manly stature are given unqualified emphasis. This adaptability to changing or different situations is further demonstrated in Ogbuefi Ezeudu's comment on the punishment meted out to Okonkwo for his violation of the sacred Week of Peace.