***Things Fall Apart***

**Discussion Questions**

**Part I (Chs. 1-13)**

1. Achebe takes the title for his novel from a line in a classic poem "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats (1865-1939; Irish). Read "The Second Coming" (below) and consider why Achebe might chose to take the title of his novel from Yeats’ poem. Consider Achebe’s literary **allusion** to Yeats’ poem: What can you expect this story to be about?

**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  
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 Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart.* Consider him as an Igbo heroic mythic character: how does he work to achieve greatness as defined by his and culture? What are Okonkwo’s strengths and weaknesses?
2. Describe Unoka, Okonkwo’s father. What are Okonkwo’s feelings toward Unoka, and why? How does the (negative) example of his father shape Okonkwo’s character and actions? What do the early descriptions of Okonkwo’s success and Unoka’s failure tell us about Igbo society? How does one succeed in this cultural context? What do we learn from the system of the taking of titles? Who seems to be excluded from opportunities to gain such success?
3. Describe the **narrator** of *Things Fall Apart,*the "voice" telling us the story of Okonkwo, Umuofia, and the Igbo world of the nine villages. How would you describe this narrative voice, its point of view, its values and perspectives?
4. Consider the impact of Achebe’s use of **"African English."** Describe who Achebe’s intended audience(s) might be. What is the effect on you, as a Western reader and outsider to Igbo culture? What cultural values of the Igbo people are reflected in Achebe’s use of proverbs?
5. 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?
6. What effect does night have on the people in Ch. 2? What do they fear? How do they deal with their fear of snakes at night?
7. What is the cause and nature of the conflict with Mbaino?
8. Chielo, the priestess of Agbala is introduced in Ch. 3. What does her power and status in Umuofia suggest about women’s roles in Igbo culture and religious beliefs? Later in the novel, note Chielo’s roles in the village (e.g., in Ch. 6). What are those roles? What does the Ch. 11 incident involving the priestess of Agbala tell us about the values of the culture? What side of Okonkwo is revealed by his behavior during that long night?
9. The **chi** or personal spirit is a recurring theme in the novel, a spiritual belief important to understanding the main character Okonkwo. Interpret this proverb, spoken of Okonkwo: "When a man says yes his chi says yes also." Trace further references in the novel to the chi. What role does Okonkwo’s chi play in shaping his destiny? Note, however, that "The Igbo people did not believe that a man’s chi controlled his entire destiny.” Trace the other factors at work in Okonkwo’s case?
10. Compare **Obierika—**a man "who thinks about things"--to Okonkwo. Consider Obierika as a kind of **foil**—a parallel or contrasting character--to Okonkwo: Note the instances when Okonkwo fails to heed the advice of others, especially of Obierika: what are the consequences? Three times in Part I, Okonkwo breaks Igbo taboos: what drives him to do so in each case, and what are the consequences to Okonkwo, to his family, and to his community?
11. **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? What is Okonkwo’s attitude toward women? I n this polygamous culture, men may take more than one wife and each household is enclosed in a compound. 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.
12. What is the crime that causes Okonkwo's to be reprimanded in Ch. 4? What does it tell you about the values of the culture? Why, according to Ezeani, is considered wrong even at times other than Peace Week?
13. Briefly summarize the story of Ekwefi given in Ch. 5. What kind of a woman is she? Ezinma is believed to be an **ogbanje**, meaning a “wicked spirit” who was being born and dying over and over again, spitefully grieving its parents. What is done to break the cycle of birth and death (Ch. 9)? Why does Ekwefi prize her daughter Ezinma so highly? What attitudes toward children does it reflect?
14. Consider the case of Ikemefuna: What is the purpose of the taking of Ikemefuna? How does he come to stay in Okonkwo’s home? What is Okonkwo's relationship with Ikemefuna? Compare Okonkwo’s feelings to Nwoye’s affection for Ikemefuna. Why is Okonkwo disappointed with his son Nwoye? How has Nwoye begun to "act like a man" (Ch. 7)? What values does Okonkwo associate with manliness? How does Nwoye relate to these values? What are the reasons and circumstances of Ikemefuna’s death? Why does Okonkwo act as he does, despite the advice of others not to participate in the killing of Ikemefuna (Ch. 7)? How does Nwoye feel and (re)act? Compare Okonkwo’s attitude toward Nwoye to Okonkwo’s attitude toward his daughter Ezinma (presented in Ch. 8).
15. Most traditional African cultures have considered twins magical or cursed: Twins are in fact unusually common among the Igbo, and some subgroups value them highly. However, the people of Umuofia do not and "throw" twins "away," though children are valued highly by the Igbo. We learn this shortly after Ikemefuna's death is recounted. What do Nwoye and Obierika think of these aspects of Umuofia culture?
16. Consider the marriage customs of the Igbo depicted in *Things Fall Apart.* Compare Igbo marriage customs to ours in the U.S.: what are the advantages and disadvantages of each system? In Ch. 12, how is the importance of family emphasized in the Uri ceremony, when the bridewealth is paid?
17. 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?
18. The egwugwu ceremony of the Igbo is dramatized in Ch. 10. Who are the egwugwu and what are the functions of the ceremony?
19. Having shown us an engagement ceremony in Ch. 12, Achebe depicts a funeral in Ch. 13. How does the one-handed egwugwu praise the dead man?" What do we learn from the depiction of the funeral ceremony? What tragic incident forces Okonkwo into exile?
20. Already in Part I of the story, internal rivalries and disagreements have begun to erode the unity and integrity of the village. What are these internal conflicts? What part does the village leader Okonkwo play in the dissension? How does Okonkwo jeopardize his own authority within his community?
21. Part I presents Igbo life and culture before the coming of the white man and colonialism. 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?
22. Describe your initial reading experience and response(s) to *Things Fall Apart*Part I 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?