Things Fall Apart, Part 2: Crash Course Literature 209

Crash Course: Literature
https://youtube.com/watch?v=oyvDYZ6hJNA
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/oyvDYZ6hJNA

Hi I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature, and today we continue our discussion of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart.
Mr. Green, Mr. Green! I can't even believe we're spending two weeks on this book. Like, it's about as long as a Babysitter's Club book.
Okay, couple things, Me From the Past. First off, the length of a book is not directly proportional to its quality. Secondly, I could do, like, five Crash Course Literatures on Babysitter's Club 26, Claudia and the Sad Goodbye.
Trying to pretend that you didn't like The Babysitter's Club so you'll seem cool - I see through you, Me From the Past!
So, Things Fall apart is interesting on a lot of levels, and part of that is due to the historical contexts of the story. And I did say contexts, plural.
Because it's a historical novel about the colonization of Africa in the late 19th century, but it was written in the late 1950s, just as European colonial powers were giving up their colonies.
And like the novel, Chinua Achebe lived between these two worlds. So let's start there.
[INTRO]
So Chinua Achebe was born Albert Chinualumogu Achebe in 1930, about eighty years after the first missionaries arrived in Igboland. His father had converted to Christianity, hence the Albert, through one of the missionary schools in Nigeria and became an evangelist for the church.
But the rest of Achebe's family adhered to the traditional Igbo culture and religious traditions, which meant Achebe spent his childhood at "the crossroads of culture," as he once put it.
By the age of eight, he could read in Igbo and in English. He read Shakespeare and missionary texts one day and sat in Igbo storytelling circles the next.
And he wrote Things Fall Apart to "retell the story of my encounter with Europe in a way acceptable to me," and to counter the traditional European view of Africa and Africans with a human picture that matched the complexity of actual humans.
And with Okonkwo's story, Achebe grounds the reader really deeply in the ancient Igbo life and culture before there's even any mention of missionaries. So we get a clear look at the structures and beliefs and traditions that held the community together before Europeans arrived.
Except, of course, it's also not a clear look because one, we're reading fiction. More importantly, we're reading fiction written a hundred years after European contact.
Anyway, early on in Things Fall Apart, we hear that in Igboland, "The land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors."
So Achebe shows us a functioning society with institutions like the tribal council that settle disputes and bring order to Igboland. Now these institutions may not be recognizable to the Westerners who showed up for the palm oil, but they had functioned for thousands of years.
And then, when British missionaries and colonial governors arrive on the scene, they fail to understand these institutions and they try to replace them with their own forms of religion and government.
But one of the fascinating things about this novel is that it doesn't unambiguously condemn or praise either worldview, right? Like, there are clearly problems with both systems of justice.
And that really runs counter to the European essentializing of pre-colonial African lives, which usually imagines them either as uncivilized savages or else as these innocents living in an Edenic utopia.
So Okonkwo is in exile when the Europeans first show up in the story, but when he returns to his transformed community, he urges resistance.
But his friend Obierika responds sadly, "It is already too late. Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government."
This is of course particularly interesting considering that it was written in the context of a decolonizing late 1950s Africa.
So how did the British Empire end up coming to power in Igboland? Well, let's go to the Thought Bubble.
So in the 19th century, when the events of this story took place, all the great European powers were busily setting up colonial empires across the world.
These overseas colonies were a real win/win for Europe, as they not only furnished raw materials to feed the manufacturing economies back home, they also acted as new markets in which to sell industrial goods. So colonies were popular.
They were so popular, in fact, that the German Chancellor organized a conference to divide up Africa among the Europeans, in order to avoid any wars over the continent.
They would also have the happy side effect of spreading the so-called
Three C's: commerce, Christianity, and civilization.
So, at the Berlin conference of 1885, Africa's fate was decided. Oh, also no one from Africa was invited to the conference, naturally.
In West Africa, much of the colonial trade had been in slaves prior to 1807, and most of that horrifying business was done on the coast. There wasn't much colonial settling in the interior until after the slave trade was banned in the British Empire.
With the slave trade no longer an option, the British turned to palm trees. Palm oil made for a great lubricant for industrial machinery, and after colonization, more than 16 million pounds worth, that's currency not weight, by the way, were exported per year.
The British Empire laid claim to Igboland, which was rich in palm trees and also non-Christians, a perfect opportunity to put the three C's into practice.
Thanks, Thought Bubble. So, that helps us to understand the historical context for the setting of the book. The OTHER historical context is the time in which it was written.
By 1958, Africa was beginning the process of decolonization, as European powers gave up their colonies.
And that meant that throughout Africa, people were having conversations about what the future should look like. Should we embrace European-style nation states?
Should we have some kind of pan-African cooperation?
Marxism, capitalism - who would make a better ally, the Soviet Union or the United States?
And so in that context, Achebe gives us a story about the pre-colonial Igbo world,
which has a stability, and a kind of strength to it, but is certainly not without its problems, while also giving us a look at colonial Igboland.
But it's interesting to note that because he is obsessed with strength and acts out of fear, Okonkwo doesn't fare particularly well under either structure.
But anyway, back to the text. So the British incursion into Igboland is the focus of the final part of the book. Missionaries are the first to arrive in the interior villages, and at first, there doesn't seem to be much cause for alarm.
The first missionary Okonkwo encounters is a guy named Mr. Kiaga and he is characterized as a man of great faith but is thought of as "harmless."
Then there's Mr. Brown, the missionary based in Umuofia, who gained respect through a "policy of compromise and accommodation." Mr Brown is willing to listen to the villagers talk about their beliefs, and tries to incorporate some of their traditions into the practices of his Christianity.
But then Mr. Brown's successor in Umuofia, the Reverend James Smith, "saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness."
And Smith's uncompromising stance inevitably leads to conflict with the people of Umuofia, and ultimately to the destruction of the

mission church. We're told "the red-earth church which Mr. Brown had built was a pile of earth and ashes. And for the moment the spirit of the clan was pacified."

So in three quick steps with three missionaries, we go from a harmless one to one whose rigid belief system leads the community to violence.

The town then keeps itself armed and ready for a reprisal, and "Okonkwo was almost happy again," we're told. But instead, Okonkwo and several other village leaders are arrested, beaten by their jailers, and the village is forced to pay a fine.

Okonkwo calls a town meeting to organize a forceful resistance and when the authorities arrive to break it up, he beheads one of the messengers. And then the gathered villagers do not rally to his side, and he knows that his cause is lost. "He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape."

And then when the British District Commissioner arrives to arrest Okonkwo, he finds that Okonkwo has hanged himself.

Achebe closes the novel by revealing the District Commissioner's thoughts about all he had learned "in the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa."

The Commissioner wants to write a book about his experiences, which he plans to call "The Pacification of the Primitives of the Lower Niger." And he decides that Okonkwo, the textured character we've come to know through the course of this novel, would warrant, "Perhaps not a chapter, but a reasonable paragraph."

In those final moments of the novel, we see the loss of humanity that's inherent to colonization, and indeed that's inherent to the privileged gazing upon the other.

The European system of colonization so profoundly failed to see human beings as human beings that it wrought destruction in Africa and across the world.