# If One Finger Brought Oil - Things Fall Apart part I: Crash Course Literature 208

Crash Course: Literature
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Hi I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature, and today we're going to talk about Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe.
Things Fall Apart is set in what is now Nigeria during the late 19th century, but it was written in 1958, as the colonial system was falling apart in Africa.
And one of the reasons Things Fall Apart is so important is that prior to it, most novels about Africa and Africans in English had been written by Europeans. Achebe turned the traditional European notion of Africans as savages on its head, and confronted the great failure of people to, quote, "see other human beings as human beings."
With characters that you can feel with and think with and breathe with, layer after layer of the reality of the colonial situation in Igboland is exposed, and we see the vicious, cyclical realities that are produced by both individual and institutional power when it's based in fear and hatred and ignorance.
[INTRO]
So things fall apart in Things Fall Apart not only because of the outside pressures of colonialism, but also because of the interior pressures of the main character, Okonkwo.
Okonkwo is a man known "throughout the nine villages and even beyond" whose "fame rested on solid personal achievements." He is known for his strength and his wrestling ability.
Like during his prime, in one of the community festivals, before a crowd of 10,000 or more people, Okonkwo out-wrestled a man known as the Cat in a match. The Cat!
And we're told of this match, " the old men agreed it was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights."
We learn all of this, by the way, in the opening paragraph of the novel, so we are immediately drawn into this world of order and belief, of competition and struggle, and of stories that are kept and passed down by elders.
And we know from the beginning that Okonkwo is a man held in high esteem not only for his wrestling ability, but also because he "had risen so suddenly from great poverty and misfortune to be one of the lords of his clan."
But despite his status and his achievements, Okonkwo is haunted. Now it's not quite the ghost of the Hamlet's father walking around at midnight brooding about vengeance, but Okonkwo sees his father everywhere he goes. His father, Unoka, owed debts all over town and spent like all of his time playing the flute and drinking palm wine.
Mr. Green, Mr. Green, that sounds pretty good actually!
I'm sure it sounds lovely, Me from the Past, although we both know you can't drink a bottle of Strawberry Hill without vomiting.
But the important thing here is that in 19th century Igboland, you couldn't get ahead in life if you weren't willing to work. Which, come to think of it, is also true today, Me From the Past.
So Okonkwo grew up knowing that the whole village thought his dad was a loser, and the pain of it stuck with him. Like, Achebe writes, "his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness."
And this isn't like my fear of spiders or my fear of heights or my fear of air travel or my fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of my mouth. This is serious fear.
For Okonkwo, "It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw."
Which quote allows me to mention something really important about Things Fall Apart. That "red in tooth and claw" line is borrowed from a Tennyson poem.
And throughout the novel, Things Fall Apart is conscious both of African storytelling forms and of European ones.
This exploration of connections and differences between two narrative traditions is really interesting and it's not something you find as much in, like, you know, Jane Eyre or Hamlet.
Anyway, Okonkwo is always running from this deep down fear of weakness and failure, and it gives him the drive to go from being a sharecropper to power and status and wealth.
It also makes him into kind of a jerk.
Okonkwo develops "one passion—to hate everything that Unoka had loved. One of these things was gentleness and another was idleness."
There's a great moment in the novel where Achebe says Okonkwo, "seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody." And then notes, "And he did pounce on people quite often."
This pouncing, and more generally just his rage, eventually drive him to three transgressions he can't undo. His punishment is seven years of exile.
And then, of course, his dreams of greater power within his clan dissolve. So let's look at Okonkwo's first two big mistakes in the Thought Bubble.
Okonkwo's world, much like the ancient Greek world in Oedipus, is one where mistakes are always punished. and he does get punished for his three mistakes.
The first is his ferocious beating of one of his wives during the Week of Peace, a week when all violence is forbidden, to honor the Earth goddess and make sure this year's harvest will be bountiful.
Okonkwo doesn't just break the Week of Peace, he shatters it. Not only does he beat his wife for going to get her hair plaited rather than cooking, he tries to shoot her. Luckily for all involved, he is a terrible shot, and he misses.
Side note, Okonkwo has a real problem with women throughout the book. He's consistently brutal and violent, and the description that he "rules his household with a heavy hand" is an understatement. His brutality is closely connected to his fear of anything that he perceives as gentle or weak and his ignorant belief that those traits should be associated with the feminine, which the book itself later dispels by showing one of his other wives and her courage and strength when it comes to protecting her daughter.
Okonkwo's second transgression is the killing of a boy with his machete, and it's not just any young man. It's Ikemefuna, who Okonkwo raised in his house for three years, a young man who called him Father.
Ikemefuna had been turned over to the clan as a sacrifice by another village in order to avoid war and he'd been sent to live in Okonkwo's compound, where he became a member of the family, and a great friend to Okonkwo's son.
And we're told, "Okonkwo was inwardly pleased at his son's development, and he knew it was due to Ikemefuna." Of course he never shows it, for "Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it was the emotion of anger."
So eventually, the clan decided that Ikemefuna should be killed to satisfy the Earth Goddess.
And Okonkwo is advised not to participate, due to his close relationship with the boy, but he ultimately does the killing himself, because "He was afraid of being thought weak."
Thanks Thought Bubble. Oh man, this is a sad book. But it's sad on, like, eighty-two different levels; that's what makes it so good.
So Okonkwo is finally exiled, not for beating his wife, not for killing Ikemefuna, but for an accident. His gun explodes during a funeral, and a man is killed. This is called a "female ocho," or female murder, because it was not on purpose.
I'll just briefly point to the irony of his avoidance of all things feminine and also the association of a gun exploding with femininity.
Although it was an accident, Okonkwo had killed a clan member and had offended the earth goddess, and so he goes into exile. He and his family flee the village and their home compound is burned to the ground.
Now Okonkwo's best friend, Obierka, who helps Okonkwo during his exile, wonders, "Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently?"
As is often the case in the village, the answer comes in the form of a proverb. "As the elders said, if one finger brought oil it soiled the others." Okonkwo had done wrong, and he must be exiled, or else

the whole community might be punished for what just he had done. This attitude preys on the community's fear of being entirely destroyed along with their communal memory of elders and ancestors.
And that desire to keep the community intact at all costs is why the community ultimately doesn't follow Okonkwo at the end of the novel.
But then of course even though they don't follow him, the community can't stay intact.
Why? Well, because missionaries. And the British Empire. Which are really branches of the same tree.
When the first missionaries appear before Okonkwo and his family, during their exile, only one young person was truly captivated, Okonkwo's first son, Nwoye.
And Okonkwo can sense his son slipping away, and filled with his tragic rage, he tries to control him by pinning him down at the throat and threatening him.
And as you may know if you've ever tried threatening a teenager, threats only drive them further away, and after this incident, Nwoye joins the missionaries for good.
What can I say, Okonkwo, you should've read more young adult novels.
And Okonkwo's takeaway from this experience is not that he's a jerk, but instead that his son is weak. He sits, staring into a fire, and reflects upon his son's departure and remembers that people called him "the Roaring Flame." And as he considers this, "Okonkwo's eyes were opened and he saw the whole matter clearly. Living fire begets cold, impotent ash."
So Okonkwo decides that he was the roaring flame and that his son is the cold, impotent ash.
Ooooh man, Okonkwo's eyes get opened a lot in Things Fall Apart, but his eyes never actually get opened!
By the time Okonkwo returns from exile, a Christian missionary church has arrived in his own village, and many people have converted to Christianity.
The first converts are those outcasts from society, they're not even allowed to cut their hair.
And that reminds us that it's not only the Europeans who at times have failed to see human beings as human beings.
So those outcasts are the initial converts and it eventually leads to the arrival of the British Empire and radical change in Igbo society.
And in that we see how the community's obsession with strength and stability ultimately leads to weakness and instability. Just as it does in Okonkwo's life.
So the British Empire follows on the heels of the church and sets up courts and police and prisons and trading posts.
And then finally, Okonkwo's world completely crumbles.
We'll talk more about that next week but for today, I want to end with another author who wrote about power in colonial Africa, Frantz Fanon, who talked about means of resistance.
In one of his most famous works about how power operates, his final invocation, his gesture of resistance is, 'O my body, make of me always a man who questions!'
And maybe that's where Okonkwo fell down. He isn't able to question a system that discards individuals for the perceived greater good. And he isn't able to question his own narrow definition of strength.
But let me submit to you that these problems are not exclusive to 19th century Igboland. Like Okonkwo and his community, we both as individuals and as communities also struggle to see other human beings as human beings and just as in Things Fall Apart, the consequences are often disastrous. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.
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