

Legacy Masterpiece

From *Things Fall Apart*

Novel by Chinua Achebe



Chinua Achebe
born 1930



READING 5B Analyze the moral dilemmas and quandaries presented in works of fiction as revealed by the underlying motivations and behaviors of the characters.

BACKGROUND Chinua Achebe (ä-chā'bā) grew up in Nigeria when it was still a colony of Britain. His parents, of Ibo background, largely accepted Western ways and even named him Albert to honor Queen Victoria's husband. By the time he reached college age, however, Achebe was tired of European authors who wrote about his homeland. Certain he could do better, he shortened his Ibo middle name and began writing as Chinua Achebe.

Like much of Achebe's fiction, *Things Fall Apart* deals with the cultural clashes brought about by European colonization of Africa and the tension between old ways and new. The central character, an Ibo villager named Okonkwo, is steeped in tradition and inflexible about change. He is also determined to live down his father's reputation for laziness and wastefulness. Working hard and faithfully following the old ways, he becomes an esteemed member of his village. Yet he also treats his wives and children with excessive harshness, and his fear of appearing weak like his father in fact proves to be a weakness of his own.

LITERARY ANALYSIS In the excerpt that follows, notice how fear determines **character motivation** and behavior. Because Okonkwo is afraid to be like his father, who was gentle and idle, Okonkwo goes out of his way to be severe and stoic. His wives and children also live in fear, but they react with meekness, daring not to complain. When Ikemefuna arrives at Okonkwo's house, he demonstrates his fear through acceptance by not asking why he is taken from his family and by not crying.

DISCUSS In a small group, discuss how fear can influence the way one responds to the world and the choices one makes. Why is fear such a powerful motivator, and what are some of its both negative and positive consequences?

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children. Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. 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. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still

10 remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father



was *agbala*. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title. And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion—to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness.

During the planting season Okonkwo worked daily on his farms from cock-crow until the chickens went to roost. He was a very strong man and rarely felt fatigue. But his wives and young children were not as strong, and so they suffered. But they dared not complain openly. Okonkwo's first son, Nwoye, 20 was then twelve years old but was already causing his father great anxiety for his incipient laziness. At any rate, that was how it looked to his father, and he sought to correct him by constant nagging and beating. And so Nwoye was developing into a sad-faced youth.

Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household. He had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. His own hut, or *obi*, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his three wives had her own hut, which together formed a half moon behind the *obi*. The barn was built against one end of the red walls, and long stacks of yam stood out prosperously in it. At the opposite end of the compound was a shed for the goats, and each wife built a small attachment to 30 her hut for the hens. Near the barn was a small house, the "medicine house" or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm-wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children.

So when the daughter of Umuofia was killed in Mbaino, Ikemefuna came into Okonkwo's household. When Okonkwo brought him home that day he called his most senior wife and handed him over to her.

"He belongs to the clan," he told her. "So look after him."

"Is he staying long with us?" she asked.

"Do what you are told, woman," Okonkwo thundered, and stammered. "When 40 did you become one of the *ndichie* of Umuofia?"

And so Nwoye's mother took Ikemefuna to her hut and asked no more questions.

As for the boy himself, he was terribly afraid. He could not understand what was happening to him or what he had done. How could he know that his father had taken a hand in killing a daughter of Umuofia? All he knew was that a few men had arrived at their house, conversing with his father in low tones, and at the end he had been taken out and handed over to a stranger. His mother had wept bitterly, but he had been too surprised to weep. And so the stranger had brought him, and a girl, a long, long way from home, through lonely forest paths. He did not know who the girl was, and he never saw her again.