**Themes in *Things Fall Apart***

For many writers, the theme of a novel is the driving force of the book during its creation. Even if the author doesn't consciously identify an intended theme, the creative process is directed by at least one controlling idea — a concept or principle or belief or purpose significant to the author. The theme — often several themes — guides the author by controlling where the story goes, what the characters do, what mood is portrayed, what style evolves, and what emotional effects the story will create in the reader.

From Achebe's own statements, we know that one of his themes is thecomplexity of Igbo society before the arrival of the Europeans. To support this theme, he includes detailed descriptions of the justice codes and the trial process, the social and family rituals, the marriage customs, food production and preparation processes, the process of shared leadership for the community, religious beliefs and practices, and the opportunities for virtually every man to climb the clan's ladder of success through his own efforts. The book may have been written more simply as a study of Okonkwo's deterioration in character in an increasingly unsympathetic and incompatible environment, but consider what would have been lost had Achebe not emphasized the theme of the complex and dynamic qualities of the Igbo in Umuofia.

Against Achebe's theme of Igbo cultural complexity is his theme of the clash of cultures. This collision of cultures occurs at the individual and societal levels, and the cultural misunderstanding cuts both ways: Just as the uncompromising Reverend Smith views Africans as "heathens," the Igbo initially criticize the Christians and the missionaries as "foolish." For Achebe, the Africans' misperceptions of themselves and of Europeans need realignment as much as do the misperceptions of Africans by the West. Writing as an African who had been "Europeanized," Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart* as "an act of atonement with [his] past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son." By his own act, he encourages other Africans, especially ones with Western educations, to realize that they may misperceive their native culture.

Related to the theme of cultural clash is the issue of how much the flexibility or the rigidity of the characters (and by implication, of the British and Igbo) contribute to their destiny. Because of Okonkwo's inflexible nature, he seems destined for self-destruction, even before the arrival of the European colonizers. The arrival of a new culture only hastens Okonkwo's tragic fate.

Two other characters contrast with Okonkwo in this regard: Mr. Brown, the first missionary, and Obierika, Okonkwo's good friend. Whereas Okonkwo is an unyielding man of action, the other two are more open and adaptable men of thought. Mr. Brown wins converts by first respecting the traditions and beliefs of the Igbo and subsequently allowing some accommodation in the conversion process. Like Brown, Obierika is also a reasonable and thinking person. He does not advocate the use of force to counter the colonizers and the opposition. Rather, he has an open mind about changing values and foreign culture: "Who knows what may happen tomorrow?" he comments about the arrival of foreigners. Obierika's receptive and adaptable nature may be more representative of the spirit of Umuofia than Okonkwo's unquestioning rigidity.

For example, consider Umuofia's initial lack of resistance to the establishment of a new religion in its midst. With all its deep roots in tribal heritage, the community hardly takes a stand against the intruders — against new laws as well as new religion. What accounts for this lack of community opposition? Was Igbo society more receptive and adaptable than it appeared to be? The lack of strong initial resistance may also come from the fact that the Igbo society does not foster strong central leadership. This quality encourages individual initiative toward recognition and achievement but also limits timely decision-making and the authority-backed actions needed on short notice to maintain its integrity and welfare. Whatever the reason — perhaps a combination of these reasons — the British culture and its code of behavior, ambitious for its goals of native "enlightenment" as well as of British self-enrichment, begin to encroach upon the existing Igbo culture and its corresponding code of behavior.