

The WordSmith Prompts

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Things Fall Apart – Chinua Achebe

The occasional page references are to the Heinemann New Windmills edition.

Chapter Prompts

Chapter One:

What do we learn about the tribe's values? It may help you to consider those values under the following headings...

Moral
Social
Cultural
Sporting
Economic

Chapter Two:

How do you think Achebe wants us to view Okonkwo's character and behaviour? You may take into account in your answer what we have learned about Okonkwo in Chapter One.

Chapter Three:

Why do you think Achebe gives prominence at this early point in the story to Okonkwo's failures?

Chapter Four:

What signs are there that Okonkwo's personal shortcomings will bring him trouble later?

Chapter Five:

a) Why does Okonkwo feel unenthusiastic about the feast? How does that lack of enthusiasm show itself? Why is it surprising?

b) Why does he feel excited by the wrestling? In your answer take into account the story of how Okonkwo won Ekwefi's heart. How does his excitement show itself? Why is it not surprising?

Taken together, what do the two feelings add to our understanding of Okonkwo's character?

Chapter Six:

What do you think this short chapter contributes to the story?

Chapter Seven:

How does Achebe create the feeling that Ikemefuna's death is an inevitable part of things? Consider in your answer the arrival of the locusts, the part played in the death by tribal beliefs, Okonkwo's character, and the way this part of the story is told.

Chapter Eight:

In what ways is Okonkwo's thinking challenged in the early part of this chapter? How does he respond?

Chapter Nine:

How and why does Achebe establish a sharp contrast between the way Okonkwo and Okagbue behave in this chapter?

Chapter Ten:

How effective is the tribe's system of justice as illustrated here? What is significant, as far as the story is concerned, about the fact that Okonkwo is one of the egwugwu?

Chapter Eleven:

What conflicting forces are probably at work within each of the four characters in this chapter?

Chapter Twelve:

How does Achebe want us to view the life of the tribe, as evidenced here? Why might you expect this chapter to be something of a preparation for the novel's turning-point?

Chapter Thirteen:

What view does Achebe take of Okonkwo's banishment? How do you view it?

Chapter Fourteen:

How does Uchendu's advice to Okonkwo suggest some directions the story may take from this point on? Imagine you write a 'personal advice' column for a newspaper or magazine. Re-express Uchendu's advice in modern terms (and more briefly).

Chapter Fifteen:

‘There is no story that is not true,’ says Uchendu on Page 123. What do you think he means? Illustrate your answer by reference to some of the stories told so far in the novel (including the account of the locust invasion). When you have read the whole novel, explain how its story, too, is ‘true’.

Chapter Sixteen:

How does Achebe

- a) show the great gap between the two sets of beliefs (tribal and Christian)?
- b) suggest why Christianity appeals to some members of the tribe (including Nwoye)?

Chapter Seventeen:

- a) Why does Okonkwo react so violently to Nwoye’s conversion? Suggest as many reasons as you can.
- b) What understanding of the situation does he come to by the end of the chapter? Can you see any connection between that understanding and your answer to the question on Chapter Seven?

Chapter Eighteen:

What do we learn from this chapter about how people of differing beliefs become hostile towards each other? Note the parts played not only by the voices of extremism, but also by those of moderation.

Chapter Nineteen:

Explain how this chapter is both a statement of faith and an expression of fear. How does Achebe lead us to be concerned for Okonkwo, as well as for the tribe?

Chapter Twenty:

What are ‘the things that held [the tribe] together’, and how have they been cut? What advice do you think Uchendu might have given Okonkwo now, if he had been here? (Read again the advice he gives him at the end of Chapter Fourteen.)

Chapter Twenty-One:

How does this chapter hold out hope for peaceful compromise? What signs are there that this may not be achieved easily?

Chapter Twenty-Two:

What differences do you note in the way of thinking of the two sides in this conflict, and also in the language they use?

Chapter Twenty-Three:

How are the tribe's leaders betrayed by

- a) the District Commissioner
- b) the Court Messengers
- c) their own standards of conduct?

Chapter Twenty-Four:

What are the signs, and the outcomes, of Okonkwo's isolation?

Chapter Twenty-Five:

Explain the ironies in this chapter.

General Essay Prompts

Questions are ordered according to the SCASI structure (Setting, Character, Action, Style and Ideas), with some overlap among the various areas.

*Prompts modelled on past AP exam questions

**Prompts modelled on past IB exam questions

***Prompts modelled on past IGCE A Level exam questions

Setting

1. What do you find most memorable about the tribal way of life as described in *Things Fall Apart*?

2. How effectively, and by what methods, does Achebe transport the reader to Africa?

3. ‘History gives us the facts, sort of, but from literary works we can learn what the past smelled like, sounded like, and felt like, the forgotten gritty details of a lost era. Literature brings us as close as we can come to reinhabiting the past’ (Scott Herring).

How does Chinua Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart*, help us to ‘reinhabit the past’?

4. How far have novelists you have studied developed a sense of community in their novels? Why have they thought it important to do that?***

5. Many writers use a country setting to establish values within a work of literature. For example, the country may be a place of virtue and peace or one of primitivism and ignorance. Choose a novel or play in which such a setting plays a significant role. Then write an essay in which you analyze how the country setting functions in the work as a whole.*

6. Novels and plays often include scenes of weddings, funerals, parties, and other social occasions. Such scenes may reveal the values of the characters and the society in which they live.

Select a novel or play that includes such a scene and, in a focused essay, discuss the contribution the scene makes to the meaning of the work as a whole.*

7. Show how in one or more works of literature you have studied a character’s isolation (physical, social, psychological) within the work’s setting plays an important part in the story. How does that isolation lead to either self-knowledge or self-destruction – or both?*

8. ‘You can leave home all you want, but home will never leave you’ (Sonsyrea Tate).

Explore the part played in a novel or novels you have studied by characters’ sense of ‘home’ – whether their feelings are positive or negative, and regardless of whether they are away from what they regard as home, or still living there.*

9. 'Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted' yet it can become 'a potent, even enriching' experience (Edward Said).

Discuss a character's experience of exile in a novel or play you have studied. Consider both the positive and negative aspects of the experience, and show how it relates to the author's overall purpose in the work.*

10. Novels and plays often depict characters caught between colliding cultures – national, regional, ethnic, religious, institutional. Select a novel or play in which a character responds to such a cultural collision. Then write a well-organized essay in which you describe the character's response and explain its relevance to the work as a whole.*

11. 'Although in poems, plays and novels we meet individual characters in a range of historical, social and cultural settings, their shared humanity allows us to engage with them, despite those differences in setting.'

Explore the settings of literary texts you have studied, showing how the 'shared humanity' of their characters allows the writing to transcend the limitations of time and place.***

Character

12. Literature often depicts individuals who are, or who see themselves as, different from the people around them. Write an essay in which you explore some of the tensions which arise from such differences (real or imagined) in a novel or play you have studied.

13. 'An honest man can feel no pleasure in the exercise of power over his fellow citizens' (Thomas Jefferson).

Explore the means by which, in a novel or play of your choice, one character attempts to exercise control over other people. How successful is he (or she)? How does the writer want us to feel about the character's success – or failure?

14. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, 'Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy.'

Select a novel or play in which a major character exhibits heroic qualities but suffers a tragic downfall. Examine the relationship between the character's heroic qualities and his or her downfall. Pay particular attention to any irony the novelist or dramatist reveals in the connection between the heroism and the tragedy.

15. 'Traditionally, the hero somehow represents the community and carries with him its hopes and fears.'

How far would you regard this to be true of Okonkwo?***

16. Examine Okonkwo's attempts, as the story develops, to understand both himself and what is happening around him. Has he made any progress in either of those attempts by the end of the novel?

17. 'The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way' (E. M. Forster).

By this standard, is Okonkwo a round character?

18. 'Writers are at their best when they focus on the imperfections in human nature.'

Show how some particularly powerful writing derives its impact from such a focus.***

19. 'In our world of ordinary men and women – living ordinary lives, frittering away their time on petty activities, it raises our spirits to read of individuals of intensity. They awaken our sense of the potential of humans.'

To what extent does one or more of the major characters in a novel or play you have studied 'awaken our sense of human potential'? Does the experience raise our spirits?

20. 'The closer a man approaches tragedy the more intense is his concentration of emotion upon the fixed point of his commitment, which is to say the closer he approaches what in life we call fanaticism' (Arthur Miller).

How accurate an account does this quotation provide of the changes we see in Okonkwo as his story develops?

21. Morally ambiguous characters – characters whose behaviour discourages the reader from identifying them as wholly evil or wholly good – are at the heart of many works of literature. Choose a novel or play in which a morally ambiguous character plays a pivotal role. Then write an essay in which you explain how the character can be viewed as morally ambiguous and why his or her moral ambiguity is significant to the work as a whole.*

22. 'The glory of the protagonist is always paid for by a lot of secondary characters' (Tony Hoagland).

Relate that comment to *Things Fall Apart*.

23. In a novel or play, a 'confidant' (male) or 'confidante' (female) is a character, often a friend or relative of the hero or heroine, whose role is to be present when the hero or heroine needs a sympathetic listener to confide in. Frequently the result is, as Henry James remarked, that the 'confidant' or 'confidante' can be as much 'the reader's friend as the protagonist's.' However, the author sometimes uses this character for other purposes as well.

Choose a 'confidant' or 'confidante' from a novel or play of recognized literary merit and write an essay in which you discuss the various ways this character functions in the work.*

24. 'In literature, as in love, we are astonished at the choices made by other people' (Andre Maurois).

Are we at all astonished by the choices made in the course of *Things Fall Apart*? What do those choices add to the overall impact, or significance, of the story?

25. Elizabeth Bowen wrote of 'The primary quality of the novelist – an all-embracing, Christ-like compassion'.

How far does a feeling of compassion permeate *Things Fall Apart*?

Action

26. 'Narrative point of view' = who tells the story; 'narrative voice' = how they speak to the reader.

With reference to one or two pieces of fiction you have studied, explore the decisions taken by novelists about one or both of those aspects of their writing, and the effect of those decisions on the reader's experience.**

27. A character's attempt to achieve something he or she sees as important is central to many plays, novels, and poems. Choose a literary work in which a character undertakes such an attempt. Show with clear evidence from the work how the character's efforts are used to develop a theme in the work.*

28. In many works of literature, past events can affect, positively or negatively, the present actions, attitudes, or values of a character. Choose a novel or play in which a character must contend with some aspect of the past, either personal or societal. Then write an essay in which you show how the character's relationship to the past contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.*

29. The breaking of 'taboos', or indulgence in forbidden behaviour, can be a source of tension and conflict in plays and novels. Show how this is the case in one or two pieces of writing you know well.**

30. Works of literature often depict acts of betrayal. Friends and even family may betray a protagonist; main characters may likewise be guilty of treachery or may betray their own values. Select a novel or play that includes such acts of betrayal. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze the nature of the betrayal and show how it contributes to the meaning of the work as whole.*

31. Examine the ways in which novelists whose work you have studied present stories of failure or suffering. What do you gather about the effect they are trying to produce in their readers?***

32. The novelist E. M. Forster wrote that the basic quality of a good story is ‘that of making the audience want to know what happens next.’

How does Chinua Achebe work to make us want to know ‘what happens next’ in *Things Fall Apart*?

33. Show how in novels, short stories or plays you have studied writers use uncertainty as a means of introducing tension into their writing.**

34. ‘Among the most powerful tools at a storyteller’s disposal are suspense and surprise.’

Explain the difference between those two features of novels and plays, illustrating your answer from literature of quality you have studied.**

35. Many narratives have one or more significant moments of crisis. Write about the significance of crises in the work of writers you have studied.***

36. How do separation and/or reunion provide heightened levels of intensity in works of literature you have studied? What do the examples you have used suggest about human nature and human needs?***

37. ‘At every stage in the progress of his tale the novelist must rely on what may be called the *illuminating incident* to reveal and emphasize the inner meaning of each situation. Illuminating incidents are the magic casements of fiction, its vistas on infinity’ (Edith Wharton).

Select an ‘illuminating incident’ from a novel or play of literary merit and explain how it throws light both on the situation in which it occurs and on the meaning of the whole piece of work.*

38. ‘In the end is my beginning.’

This has been said by an author to explain how he organises his writing. Examine one or more novels or plays to see whether their structure reflects a similar mode of planning.**

39. ‘Story involves action. Action towards an end not to be foreseen (by the reader) but also towards an end which, having *been* reached, must be seen to have been from the start inevitable’ (Elizabeth Bowen).

How true is this of the action of *Things Fall Apart*?

40. ‘In the story, things fall apart; in the novel, things come together.’

Discuss this statement.

41. 'Life goes on, but literary texts must end.'

In light of this view, consider ways in which writers end their narratives, paying some attention to ways in which they convey the idea that 'Life goes on'.***

Style

42. Select a passage (a longish paragraph or two) whose style you see as typical of the whole novel, and analyse its stylistic features. How is the novel's style suited to its subject matter?

43. 'Achebe's tone in *Things Fall Apart* is that of the traditional storyteller – calm yet intent, distanced but caring, measured but eager to carry the listener towards the tale's conclusion.'

Use examples from the novel to explore the paradoxes in that comment.

44. 'When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock – to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures' (Flannery O'Connor).

What light may that statement throw on nature and purpose of Chinua Achebe's writing style in *Things Fall Apart*?

45. 'Some writers of fiction paint with a very broad brush and carefully avoid cluttering their writing with minutiae; others make full use of significant detail to add texture and deeper meaning to the stories they tell.'

Discuss the use of significant detail in novels or short stories you have studied.**

46. 'It is the process of argument and persuasion that most strongly engages us.'

In light of this view, consider ways in which writers use argument and persuasion.***

47. 'DIALOGUE Must (1) Further Plot; (2) Express Character' (Elizabeth Bowen).

Does the dialogue in *Things Fall Apart* pass that test - or challenge its validity?

48. 'The difficulty of literature is not to write, but to write what you mean; not to affect your reader, but to affect him precisely as you wish' (Robert Louis Stevenson).

Discuss a novel you have studied (or a play or a collection of poetry), explaining how the way it is written (its style) it has affected you.

49. 'I write as I walk because I want to get somewhere and I write as straight as I can, just as I walk as straight as I can, because that is the best way to get there' (H. G. Wells).

How does that comment help explain the effectiveness of Achebe's style of writing?

50. 'When we meet with a natural style, we are surprised and delighted, for we expected to find an author, and we have found a man' (Blaise Pascal).

Do we feel, as we read *Things Fall Apart*, that we are meeting, in Chinua Achebe, an author or a man?

Ideas

51. Discuss the writers' treatment of one or more of the following themes in novels you have studied: love, deceit, power, wealth, war, change, courage, illness and death, revenge, self-discovery, redemption**

52. How important is it for us to feel, at the end of a novel, that justice has been done? What sort of justice, if any, has been done by the end of *Things Fall Apart*?

53. Some novels and plays seem to advocate change in social or political attitudes or in traditions. Choose such a novel or play and note briefly the particular attitudes or traditions that the author apparently wishes to modify. Then analyze the techniques the author uses to influence the reader's or audience's views.*

54. 'Novels from earlier centuries and novels about distant places take us into worlds different from our own, but must have something to say about issues of importance in the world to which we, the readers, will return.'

Show how issues relevant to today's world are raised in *Things Fall Apart*.

55. What view does the novel take of the processes of colonialism and its effects on native communities? How much strength does the novel take from the fact that its author is African?

56. What does *Things Fall Apart* reveal about how conflict arises between different racial, cultural and religious groups? Does the novel have anything to say about how such conflict can be avoided or resolved?

57. Examine the ways in which novelists whose work you have studied present stories of failure or suffering. What do you gather about the effect they are trying to produce in their readers?***

58. 'The skull lies only a little way beneath the skin.'

In light of this comment, consider ways in which writers explore the awareness of death.***

59. A symbol is an object, action, or event that represents something or that creates a range of associations beyond itself. In literary works a symbol can express an idea, clarify meaning, or enlarge literal meaning.

Select a novel or play and, focusing on one symbol, write an essay analyzing how that symbol functions in the work and what it reveals about the characters or themes of the work as a whole.*

60. Explore the part played by family in novels or plays you have studied.

61. ‘Lessons of wisdom have never such power over us as when they are wrought into the heart through the groundwork of a story’ (Laurence Sterne).

What if any ‘lessons of wisdom’ has Achebe worked into his novel?

62. ‘The novel’s satire helps explain the novel’s tragedy.’

Discuss this comment on *Things Fall Apart*.

63. ‘A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say’ (Italo Calvino).

By that standard, would you judge *Things Fall Apart* to be a classic?

General

64. Explain the continued interest in and popularity of *Things Fall Apart* as a cultural record, a political statement, an examination text and simply a ‘good read’.

65. What, in the opening pages of *Things Fall Apart*, will make the reader want to continue into the novel? What might make us decide not to read on? What would we lose if we did not do that?

66. ‘Literature is the art of writing something that will be read twice’ (Cyril Connolly).

For what reasons might we read *Things Fall Apart* twice? (Do not include ‘to prepare for an exam’ as a reason.)

67. What part does change, and in particular the tension between old and new ways of thinking and behaving, play in novels or plays you have studied?***

68. ‘Write what should not be forgotten’ (Isabel Allende).

What light does this comment throw on Chinua Achebe’s purpose in writing *Things Fall Apart*?

69. ‘The most important thing in a work of art is that it should have a kind of focus’ (Leo Tolstoy).

What would you regard as the ‘focus’ of *Things Fall Apart*?

70. 'All literature, however dark, has some light.'

Discuss that suggestion, illustrating your argument by reference to two or more works of literary merit.**

71. 'The purpose of literature is to turn blood into ink' (T.S. Eliot).

Examine the implications of that comment in relation to literature of quality you have studied.

72. A writer has explained how he sets about writing by saying, 'I always start with a visual image.'

Identify some particularly powerful visual images in works you have studied, and suggest why they may have provided the starting point for the writer in each case.**

73. 'Ultimately, literature is nothing but carpentry. With both you are working with reality, a material just as hard as wood' (Gabriel Garcia Marquez).

What sense do we have, as we read *Things Fall Apart*, that Chinua Achebe is working with reality to produce something both shapely and functional?

74. 'If a reading of *Things Fall Apart* does not make us feel uncomfortable, not as members of one social group or another, but as human beings, then the novel has not failed – but we have.'

Discuss that suggestion.

75. 'What is wonderful about great literature is that it transforms the man who reads it towards the condition of the man who wrote' (E. M. Forster).

Can we see that process working in *Things Fall Apart*?

76. 'We do not live an equal life, but one of contrasts and patchwork; now a little joy, then a sorrow, now a sin, then a generous or brave action' (Ralph Waldo Emerson).

How is that account by Emerson of the nature of life reflected in the structure and the action of *Things Fall Apart*?

77. Re-read the novel's final paragraph. Imagine you are the Commissioner. Write the 'reasonable paragraph' about Okonkwo he plans to include in his book.