

Read the following poem, which is the source of the title of Achebe's novel:

William Butler Yeats: "The Second Coming" (1921)

Yeats was attracted to the spiritual and occult world and fashioned for himself an elaborate mythology to explain human experience. "The Second Coming," written after the catastrophe of World War I and with communism and fascism rising, is a compelling glimpse of an inhuman world about to be born. Yeats believed that history in part moved in two thousand-year cycles. The Christian era, which followed that of the ancient world, was about to give way to an ominous period represented by the rough, pitiless beast in the poem.

Turning and turning in the widening [gyre \(1\)](#)
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the [Second Coming \(2\)](#) is at hand;
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of [Spiritus Mundi \(3\)](#)
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That [twenty centuries \(4\)](#)
of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Notes:

(1) Spiral, making the figure of a cone.

(2) Second Coming refers to the promised return of Christ on Doomsday, the end of the world; but in Revelation 13 Doomsday is also marked by the appearance of a monstrous beast.

(3) Spirit of the World.

(4) 2,000 years; the creature has been held back since the birth of Christ. Yeats imagines that the great heritage of Western European civilization is collapsing, and that the world will be swept by a tide of savagery from the "uncivilized" portions of the globe. As you read this novel, try to understand how Achebe's work is in part an answer to this poem.

General introduction to the novel:

Things Fall Apart, published in 1958, is the seminal African novel in English. Although there were earlier examples, notably by Achebe's fellow Nigerian, [Amos Tutuola](#), none has been so influential, not only on African literature, but on literature around the world. Its most striking feature is to create a complex and sympathetic portrait of a traditional village culture in Africa. Achebe is trying not only to inform the outside world about Ibo cultural traditions, but to remind his own people of their past and to assert that it had contained much of value. All too many Africans in his time were ready to accept the European judgment that Africa had no history or culture worth considering.

He also fiercely resents the stereotype of Africa as an undifferentiated "primitive" land, the "heart of darkness," as Conrad calls it. Throughout the novel he shows how African cultures vary among themselves and how they change over time. Look for instances of these variations as you read.

As a young boy the "African literature" he was taught consisted entirely of works by Europeans about Africa, such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, which portrays a comic African who slavishly adores his white colonist boss, to the point of gladly being shot to death by him. Achebe has said that it was his indignation at this latter novel that inspired the writing of *Things Fall Apart*. Try to see in what ways his novel answers Cary's. He also wrote a famous attack on the racism of *Heart of Darkness* which continues to be the subject of heated debate.

The language of the novel is simple but dignified. When the characters speak, they use an elevated diction which is meant to convey the sense of Ibo speech. This choice of language was a brilliant and innovative stroke, given that most earlier writers had relegated African characters to pidgin or inarticulate gibberish. One has the sense of listening to another tongue, one with a rich and valuable tradition.

In this edition, a glossary of Ibo words and phrases is printed at the end of the book. Be sure to consult it whenever you encounter a new Ibo word or phrase.