
Literary Devices In Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart

INTRODUCTION

Things Fall Apart is an African novel written by famous Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. The novel chronicles the life of Okonkwo, the leader (chief) of an Igbo community. It follows the events leading up to his banishment from the community for accidentally killing a clansman, through the seven years of his exile, to his return. It also addresses problems of emergent Africa—following the intrusion in the 1890s of white missionaries and colonial government into tribal Igbo society. The novel, which is traditionally structured and peppered with Igbo proverbs, describes the simultaneous disintegration of its protagonist Okonkwo and of his village. This essay looks at the various literary styles employed by Chinua in Things Fall Apart.

Literary devices are tools that help convey the author's ideas and points, and just as you use them in your stories, authors use them in their novels. One novel where we can see many different types of literary devices is in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart.

METAPHORS

Metaphors are figures of speech that make an implicit, implied, or hidden comparison between two things that are unrelated, but which share some common characteristics. In other words, a resemblance of two contradictory or different objects is made based on a single or some common characteristics.

Chinua uses metaphors in Things Fall Apart to describe the Igbo people, their lifestyle, and the work they do. Achebe wants the audience to see and feel the images he creates. For instance, Okonkwo, spends a lot of time in his fields working to feed his people. He understands the need for yams. He knows that the Igbo people depend on the yam as their main source of food. They use the rainy season for growing their yams. The yam is considered the king of all foods. It is a food for men; the coco-yam is a woman's crop. 'His mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women's crops, like coco-yams, beans, and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop.' In many ways, Okonkwo's sense of self is tied up in his ability to grow what is needed for the tribe. He is proud of the hard work he has put into his farming and the success he has made of it. He is well thought of in his community. Here, the yam is a metaphor for masculinity and power.

“Living fire begets cold, impotent ash (Achebe 153).”

This quote is a metaphor for Okonkwo's and Nwoye's relationship. Okonkwo is often called “Roaring Flame” and is ferocious and aggressive while his son is placid and quiet. Here Okonkwo is wracking his brain as to why he has such a womanly son who went off to join the Christians. He finally realizes everything as he stares into the fire and sees that the flames leave ash behind. The flame is Okonkwo and the ash is his son Nwoye.

SYMBOLISM

Symbolism entails the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities.

“When he was a child his mother had told him a story about it. But it was as silly as all women’s stories (Achebe 75).”

This quote is an example of symbolism because Okonkwo thinks stories and folktales display womanliness. He thinks they are only for women and children while war tales are for men. Contrary to the mothers’ beliefs, he finds the stories to have little importance or valuable morals. Enzima and other females still often tell these tales and Nwoye, Okonkwo’s son, enjoys them. This upsets Okonkwo greatly because Nwoye seems weak and feminine to him because of his delight in hearing stories.

“That is the money from your yams,’ he said. ‘I sold...and gave out others to sharecroppers...I thought you would need the money now and so I brought it (Achebe 142).”

This quote, when Obierika helps Okonkwo during his time in exile, is an example of another symbol. Yams are extremely important to the Umuofia clan not only for food and survival. They are only farmed by men while women attend to less labor-intensive crops. A man’s yam field and harvest is his pride and shows how much he is dedicated to work and how much he is willing to support his family. The yams and their farming are a symbol of manliness.

“The last big rains of the year were falling.” (Achebe 162)

Achebe uses symbolism, by bringing up the rains here. The rains are a symbol of the washing away of the seven years of exile. They are symbolizing Okonkwo’s rebirth and new beginning as him and his family return Umuofia after being banished for so long.

FORESHADOWING IN THINGS FALL APART

This refers to a case where a writer gives an advance hint of what is to come later in the story. Often it appears at the beginning of a story, or a chapter, and helps the reader develop expectations about the coming events in a story.

“During the last planting season a white man had appeared in their clan.’ ‘An albino,’ suggested Okonkwo. ‘He was not an albino. He was quite different...he was riding an iron horse...The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them.”

This quote is foreshadowing the Europeans coming to Okonkwo’s village and bringing their strange customs with them. The Oracle tells the people that destruction and change will come with the white men and this is clearly telling that Okonkwo’s clan will come into contact with the

Europeans in the near future. Previously there had also been foreshadowing with the mention of the man with leprosy and the absurdity of a person being white, but now the foreshadowing is becoming more and more obvious as the story moves along.

FLASHBACK

These are interruptions that writers do to insert past events, in order to provide background or context to the current events of a narrative

“But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo’s first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him...it was the poetry of the new religion... something felt... and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul-the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed (Achebe 147).”

This quote is part of a flashback that explains why Nwoye joined the missionaries and left his father Okonkwo. Achebe uses flashbacks to give more detail about certain circumstances, especially if the story moves between villages. Flashbacks explain more about a character and their decisions in the story. Achebe sometimes uses them to explain why Okonkwo is overly manly and why Ekwefi is extremely protective of Enzima.

IRONY

This refers to incongruity between expectations for a situation and the reality of that situation.

“They want a piece of land to build their shrine,’ said Uchendu to his peers when they consulted among themselves. ‘We shall give them a piece of land.’ He paused, and there was a murmur of surprise and disagreement. ‘Let us give them a portion of the Evil Forest. They boast about victory over death. Let us give them a real battlefield in which to show their victory.’ (Achebe 149)

This quote shows the use of plain irony in the novel. The Christians are given a plot of land in the Evil Forest because the Igbo people believed that if they gave them land in the evil forest they would die and their clan could go back to their previous way of life. In the Igbo culture it was known among the people that no one lived longer than seven market days in the evil forest because of the spirits and darkness that dwell there. But, the Christians did not die after seven market days and the Ibo people were shocked when they continued to prosper and built up their church, so needless to say their plan hadn’t worked.

Another example of irony is Okonkwo's suicide at the end of novel. Okonkwo is a proud and important man, so you might not expect him to commit suicide. His death is especially ironic when you consider what he regularly said after the terrible harvest year: "Since I survived that year,' he always said, 'I shall survive anything.' He put it down to his inflexible will.'

After saying he could survive anything, you would obviously not expect him to commit suicide. Yet, in the end, it is his inflexible will that causes his suicide because he cannot deal with the

change brought by the missionaries. So his death is even more ironic because the very thing that he says can get him through anything--his will--is what causes him to kill himself.

SIMILES

This is a figure of speech that draws resemblance with the help of the words "like" or "as."

"He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth."
(Achebe 147)

More than any other literary devices the author makes use of similes to enhance his writing. Achebe uses similes to illustrate Umuofia and represent the lifestyle of the community. In this case the words of the hymn offer a much needed relief to Okonkwo's oldest son who felt out of place in the Igbo society.

"Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water," (Achebe 1).

This simile is used to compare him to the man he was wrestling with. It describes his character trait of being a good wrestler.

"He threw himself into it like one possessed," (Achebe 19).

This is used to describe Okonkwo's character trait of always being hard-working. It describes him as having the urge to work, and makes it seem, as if he can hardly make himself not work.

PERSONIFICATION

This is a figure of speech in which a thing such as an idea or an animal is given human attributes. The non-human objects are portrayed in such a way that we feel they have the ability to act like human beings.

"Okonkwo was choked with hate." (Achebe 195)

This is an example of personification as clearly anger cannot actually choke someone as it is an emotion and not a physical force. It shows the intensity of the hatred and anger that Okonkwo has towards the white men. He has gotten to such a point where his dislike for them is so much that it makes it hard for him to breath.

'He heard the ogene of the town crier piercing the still night air," (Achebe 9).

This is another example of personification. It exaggerates the characteristics of the crier's voice. The author uses it to create a feeling of urgency.

“... the huts, which formed a half moon behind the obi,” (Achebe 14).

This is an example of personification. It is describing the shape of the huts, which couldn't actually form a half-moon. He uses it to describe the setting.

ALLUSION

Allusion is a brief and indirect reference to a person, place, thing or idea of historical, cultural, literary or political significance. It does not describe in detail the person or thing to which it refers.

How does Achebe Employ Allusion?

In this novel, Achebe used biblical allusions to foreshadow the arrival of Christian missionaries and to give context to their theology. For instance, the plague of locusts that occurs in chapter 7 alludes to the plague of locusts that blights Egypt in the book of Exodus. This allusion can be seen as a foreshadowing of the missionaries' disruptive arrival. This is fulfilled in chapter 15, where Obierika tells Okonkwo of the destruction of Abame village. After the first white missionary arrived, the local Oracle called the white men locusts and claimed that more of them would come and destroy the town. That prophecy proved true as Abame was later massacred by white men.

Secondly, the character Enoch, in *Things Fall Apart* refers to a recent convert to Christianity. Enoch becomes zealous about the Christian faith and disrupts the spiritual traditions of Umuofia. In the Old Testament of the Bible, Enoch, the grandfather of Noah, is known for his devotion and service to God.

PROVERBS

Proverbs are short pithy sayings that usually state a general truth or pieces of advice. In the Umuofian society, proverbs are used very often in conversations and help people to understand things better. The following are examples of proverbs used in *Things Fall Apart*:

'A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness.' (Chapter 3)
this proverb simply means, if you respect greatness, you will become great yourself.

'An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb.'

This proverb means that someone is uneasy if something is said that affects them personally; whether it is a joke or not – they cannot laugh about it.

'The lizard that jumped from high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did.'

This is a simple proverb teaching people to learn to appreciate themselves even if other people

do not appreciate them.

REFERENCES

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