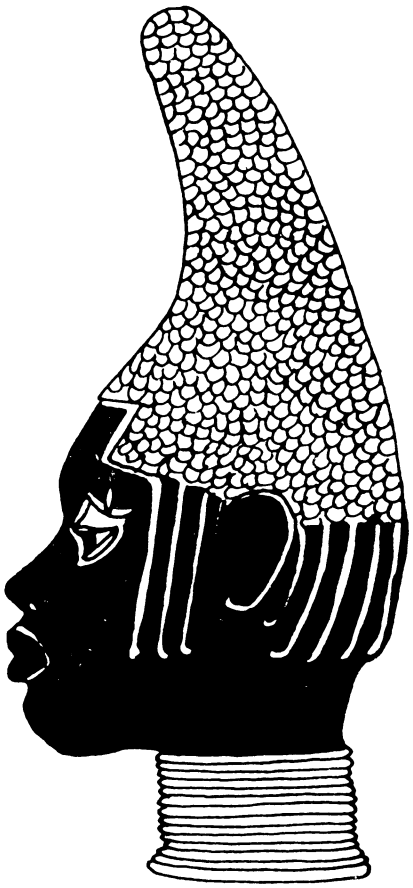

Structure and Significance in Achebe's Things Fall Apart

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The novels of Chinua Achebe illustrate the statement that 'life is chaotic, but art is orderly'. Out of the chaos of real life, he has created a patterned and artistically organized fictional world. He is able to divine the formal techniques and principles of organization which help to achieve a meaningful exploration of experience and to crystallize important insight into life, human nature and society. Much of his success depends on his being able to assimilate form to content in his work, his giving his novels a sense of completeness, as well as justifying, in a satisfying and pleasing manner, the general expectations of a discriminating audience.

Achebe's narrative consistently demonstrates a unity of intent with a unity of execution. There is in his writing an absolute economy in the use of words to describe particular incidents or to convey certain impressions which propel the narrative and add immensely to the reader's perception of a wholly conceived action. There is no loitering along the wayside for little irrelevant chit-chat, no pseudo-philosophizing, no awkward asides, no finger-pointing and no instant homilies which, though interesting in themselves, succeed only in detaining the reader and slowing down the tempo of the narrative. There is a directness and simplicity in his narrative which is typical of the African folk-tale. The effect of this terse, incisive style and, the easy co-ordination of the different strands in his narrative is to lead the action briskly and inevitably to a convincing climax, while at the same time revealing the great wealth and complexity of his imagination and his deep insights into individual and social psychology.

Let me illustrate some of these statements from *Things Fall Apart,* his first novel.

> Okonkwo was well-known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their own town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights.
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> The drum beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat.
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> That was many years ago, twenty or more, and during this time Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan. He was tall and huge, and his bushy

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> eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their outhouses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father.[[Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958) pp3-4]

This opening passage throws a great deal of light on the story in *Things Fall Apart.* The wrestling match incident tells us something about Okonkwo's prowess and standing in Umuofia as well as the intimate relationship between the individual and the community. The second part of the passage is a pen portrait of the hero himself which briefly reveals shrewd insights into Okonkwo's character. Coming as this pen-portrait does immediately after the description of the hero's defeat of the Cat and the consequent honour to his village we may suspect that we are being insidiously goaded into withholding our sympathy from him. But this is not so. What the passage does is to balance our picture of the man whose tragedy is about to unfold. Here is a man who loves his neighbours and hazards his physical well-being and prestige to bring honour and joy to their hearts (in other words, who is in full sympathy with his community), but who, in spite of that, is an intensely human person, a man whose very human faults will draw him into constant conflicts with these very neighbours. In contrast with the feeling of external harmony, therefore, we have an anticipation of potential disharmony arising from the nature of the hero's temperament. The outline of the drama is clear: how can this great man of the village, with his great temperamental weakness, affect the harmony and destiny of his village? (For Okonkwo is obviously no ordinary villager but one whose dynamism is to make a far-reaching impact on his neighbours and the community as a whole.)

The effect achieved in the passage is thus largely anticipatory. The passage reveals enough of the outline of the structure of the story to sharpen our curiosity and even raise our expectation. That Achebe is able to achieve this effect within three brief paragraphs is a remarkable triumph and says much for his narrative talent. He is able to seize upon the very quality of life which invokes in the reader the right kind of response to the world of his fiction. Notice for example how Achebe edges in the observation "He had no patience with unsuccessful men" in a most unobtrusive way, as if it does not matter at all, while in fact it is one of the key statements about Okonkwo's character. A less competent writer would spend many more words trying to make the same point and make it stand out. Achebe's absolute economy of words used with great skill accounts to an unusually high degree for the impression of remarkable concentration and power which one gets from reading *Things Fall Apart.*

The condensed effect of *Things Fall Apart* and the sense of wholeness which it gives may, in addition to being a direct result of Achebe's verbal economy and the integration of action with atmosphere, have something to do with the ease with which Achebe selects and organizes incidents to give significance to his narrative. *Things Fall*

Apart is a title which gives away the intention of the novel. But it concerns itself with more than the tragedy of one man whom blind fate and innate temperamental weakness combine to destroy. If the novel were about the tragedy of Okonkwo, it would still have provided a good story but its significance would have been relatively diminished. However, the story is not about the tragedy of one man alone, it is the tragedy of a people who find their way of life suddenly assailed by forces they do not understand and are not equipped to deal with. The successful linking of Okonkwo's predicament with the predicament of his people and society is what has given a great significance to *Things Fall Apart.* Achebe achieves his success by giving as much serious attention to social detail and cultural behaviour as he devotes to the realities of human nature and individual psychology. He is capable of holding and manipulating several threads at the same time in order to control the two levels of action which his narrative explores: the personal level and the public level.

We shall profitably refer back to the passage quoted above. The very first two sentences strike the keynote to the social background of Okonkwo's life – "fame" and "personal achievement". This is a society that appreciates personal success and recognizes the individuality of its members. But immediately following this, we are left in no doubt that the success of the individual is meaningfully sublimated through its close relevance to the overall well-being of the whole community. (What good is physical strength, for example, unless the individual who possesses it would use his advantage towards the edification of the community.) Here, the passage strongly suggests, there is little room for "fame" for fame's sake and "achievement" for achievement's sake, there is little room for purely egoistic calculation as social philosophy. We are told about the community life of the village, its heartbeat punctuated by drums and flutes, its folk-mythological outlook set out in the reference to the fight between the founder of the town and a spirit of the wild, and its linguistic atmosphere vividly created by allusion to Amalinze as 'the Cat' and to Okonkwo's fame as having grown "like a bush-fire in the harmattan". Here, therefore, we have individual character, society and atmosphere closely knit together in a singularly brief passage full of suggestion, life and power, which anticipates in a wholly satisfactory manner the whole course of the narrative.

Thus, for example, the apprehension which we feel about Okonkwo from the cursory insight we are given into his character is fully justified in the course of the story. Okonkwo has been so skilfully described that we are not likely to forget him and his weaknesses as the story moves forward. Much later in the narrative we can see vividly, in our mind's eye, the man who in a blustering mood levels his blunderbuss and actually fires it at his thoughtlessly provocative wife. We recognize the proud man whose whole world disintegrates when cruel fate conspires to drive him into exile on the very threshold of achieving the highest social distinction. We see the man who from sheer exasperation and impatience with the cowering inaction of his fellow clansmen draws his machet and cuts off the head of the insolent chief messenger, the arrogant emissary of those whose intervention has undermined all the values and institutions which Okonkwo and his people hold dear. And finally, we are shocked and dismayed though

not altogether surprised when, in the bitterness of defeat, Okonkwo commits the supreme sin of despair by hanging himself rather than fall into the hands of his triumphant enemies.

The paralyzing sense of tragedy which we feel about the life and death of Okonkwo is possible only because the man has been introduced to us with such remarkable vividness that we know him closely from the very beginning, and follow his every mood and action with considerable personal interest to the very end. In the same way, we experience a sense of tragic dismay at the falling apart of the old traditional life of Umuofia with the coming of the Christian missionaries and the British administration, because Achebe has won our sympathy by skilfully inducting us into its inner workings and the values which sustained it and gave it dignity and cohesion.

Achebe has been able to achieve so much in this novel through his proper sense of drama, in the comprehensive definition of the term advocated by Uzzell in *The Technique of the Novel:* "I define drama", writes Uzzell, "as conflict involving character. Drama involves character as well as action in a very significant manner. Of all human activity, that which is dramatic is the most interesting." Another essential element of drama in the novel is that it should advance the story along more than one significant line – in other words, whatever action is being described or recorded should add to our perception of the characters in the story; furthermore, each character in the process of development should bring some traits or impulses into the action to illuminate the general experience, the central theme or the specific predicament which the novel has set out to explore. The concept of drama thus compounds the entire region and scope of the novel – character and action, emotion and response – all of which are expressed largely through "conflicts" taking place both within the individual character and within the society. We shall see that the development of "conflict" is what imbues *Things Fall Apart* with immense dramatic effect, and that Achebe's superb grasp of the principle of conflict as an operative force on the inner personal level as well as its reflection in public relations and public gestures is the quality that gives depth, power and significance to this work.

Things Fall Apart illustrates admirably Achebe's assimilation of the principle of conflict as the balancing of many-sided traits – personal character traits and social traits – and the interaction of these individual and collective forces. A third element is always present in Achebe – the unforeseen – which introduces greater complexity and irony into the action. This last element we should regard as "fate" or "chance".

Achebe's structure of the action in this novel can be plotted roughly according to the levels at which most of the events and incidents are sustained. There is the private or personal level which centres on Okonkwo. On the positive or credit side of his character, we have a man who possesses physical prowess, who has achieved material success and who is so committed to the traditional way of life that he is ever ready and willing to defend it when it comes under attack from external forces. On the negative or debit side, we see a fiery tempered, impatient man, rash, obsessed with a fear of being thought weak, soft or sentimental, and who therefore, treats people brusquely and with scant concern for fine feelings. The third element in the unfolding of his

character is chance. Certain events, such as the accidental killing of Ezeudu's son and the subsequent exile, prove decisive in the shaping of Okonkwo's own destiny.

These three aspects are also present on the second level of the novel's action, the public or social level. On the credit side we have an integrated community with a collective outlook, which provides social, economic and psychological security for its people. The debits include a denial of security to some members of the community, such as twins, caste slaves, etc. The chance element is represented by the coming of the Christian missionaries and the British administration.

The interplay of the "debit" and "credit" sides to Okonkwo and Umuofia, together with the fatal intervention on the personal and community levels, provide the conflicts and tensions which constitute the hallmark of drama in *Things Fall Apart.* The "credit" side to Okonkwo's character is in harmony with the "credit" side to his society; this is illustrated by such incidents as Okonkwo's wrestling for his community, his acting as Umuofia's emissary to Mbaino to exact redress for the murder of a kinswoman, and his taking part in the settlement of disputes between the local people. But it maintains an ambivalent position with the "debit" side to his society as when Okonkwo out of traditionalist zeal (and no doubt his obsessive determination not to appear weak) cuts down – much against the well-meant advice of his friend, Ezeudu – Ikemefuna who has come to regard him as a father. The "debit" side to his nature brings him into conflict with the community, as illustrated by his breaking of the ritual peace through his peculiar impetuosity, by beating his wife during the Week of Peace, by rashly killing the government chief messenger and by hanging himself, thus committing an abomination against the Earth Goddess. His accidental killing of a kinsman and subsequent exile is an act of God which he could neither have foreseen nor avoided.

On the public and social level, we have a society which is ordered and self-sufficient and which provides most of its people with the basic social, economic and psychological securities. However, its stern kind of logic and code of justice also deprives some of its people of some of these basic securities. This society is suddenly confronted with rival institutions and the new order which they give rise to. A conflict develops in which the old order and the new are engaged in a deadly struggle for ascendancy. With its superior resources (including superior physical force) the new order wins in the end. We find the two levels of conflict, the personal and the public, being waged at the same time and with identical result. Okonkwo is defeated; the personal defeat symbolizes the public defeat of which it is an integral part.

This superbly formed structure does not bring out the tremendous subtlety with which Achebe weaves the rich tapestry of life and action in *Things Fall Apart.* Set down in this bald manner the impression one would form of *Things Fall Apart* is that it exhibits the symmetry of the work of an artisan and not the subtlety of a well-finished artistic work. The fact is, however, that the novel has both symmetry of structure and subtlety of execution, and that its dramatic effect is derived from both qualities.

One way in which Achebe enriches the quality of action and diversifies the struc-

ture of the narrative is by the use of irony – that subtle, almost imperceptible shifting of situations to produce the reversal of the best of surface intentions. We may just take one example from *Things Fall Apart.* We remember quite vividly that short but dramatic encounter between Okonkwo and his second wife. After Okonkwo has belaboured the unfortunate woman for cutting off a few leaves from his precious banana tree, something happens which almost gives rise to a terrible tragedy. Okonkwo decides to go hunting and asks the boy Ikemefuna to bring him his gun. Okonkwo's wife still smarting over the injustice of the beating which she has just received murmurs something about "guns that never shot". Whereupon Okonkwo runs madly into his room and comes out with the loaded gun, levels it and shoots at his sneering wife. The woman has meanwhile jumped over the wall separating the barn and the compound and fallen down at the very instant the shot is heard. There is loud wailing from the women of the compound, all of whom believe that their co-wife has been shot. Okonkwo throws down his gun, jumps into the barn and there finds his wife lying down "very much shaken and frightened but quite unhurt". It is singularly lucky that Okonkwo is such a rotten shot. Not very long after, at the celebration of the funeral of his friend, Ezeudu, Okonkwo's gun with which he hoped to fire a last salute to his friend explodes and kills Ezeudu's sixteen-year old son. This incident changes Okonkwo's life from now on. He is driven into exile.

The irony is explicit. When Okonkwo is in a most murderous mood, his gun does not kill but when his mind is farthest away from murder, it kills his good friend's son. This is not the limit of the irony. Ezeudu, it should be remembered, is the old man who had earlier warned Okonkwo, when the Oracle of the Hills and Caves demanded that Ikemefuna (Okonkwo's ward) should be killed to atone for the murder of the Umuofia woman by Ikemefuna's people, not to participate in his murder, saying: "That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death". Okonkwo does not heed this advice, for, not wishing to be thought effeminate and sentimental, he actually cuts the boy down as Ikemefuna runs to him for protection in the fatal bush.

So, here we have a truly complex ironic situation which is not isolated from the main body of the narrative but helps to unify it and deepen its insight. All the main elements of the narrative are present in this single ironic situation: the elements of the hero's character, the public element of Ikemefuna's ritual death to expiate collective guilt, and the element of fate – the intervention of blind anonymous forces.

This use of irony to draw together the main strands of narrative and aid insight is what we may regard as Achebe's forte. It is a quality which not only makes him a good story-teller but also a significant novelist.