***Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe***

***A General Summary***

***(The summary below is taken from* York Notes: *Things Fall Apart* by T. A. Dunn *pp.13-16)***

*Things Fall Apart* is a novel of twenty-five short chapters, divided intothree parts—Chapters 1-13, 14-19 and 20-25.

The title is taken from a poem called ‘The Second Coming’ by the Irish poet W.B. Yeats (1865-1939), in which he laments the passing of order and innocence from the world and fears that the changes that are taking place may not be for the best. In the poem, Yeats says:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

It can be seen immediately how appropriate this title is for this novel, which describes the change that comes over an old and firmly established society and social structure under the impact of new, different and more advanced ideas from outside.

The novel is set in Ibo-land towards the end of the nineteenth century, when Europeans were just beginning to penetrate inland in West Africa.

At the time of the novel, there was no idea of nationhood or the modem state in West Africa, and ‘Ibo-land’ is merely the convenient name we give to that large area settled by a people who all spoke the same language, Ibo, and who shared the same social structure and cultural and religious ideas. They were organised into groups of related villages in a basically democratic system, engaged in simple subsistence farming, and their lives were lived within a highly formalised framework of social relation­ ships and of primitive, animistic religion in which respect for ancestors and magic played a very large part.

Part One of the novel shows us just such a community, Umuofia, a group of nine related villages, in the period just before the arrival of the white man. Of course, the West African coast—particularly the mouth of the Niger and the Calabar Rivers—had been visited, and even settled, by Europeans for a long time, and certain importations (for example, some of the food crops and gunpowder and muskets) had penetrated inland; but none of the villagers of Umuofia had ever seen a white man and all their knowledge of them was through distant tales of slave-trading exploits.

We learn of the life of Umuofia at this period through following the life of Okonkwo, one of its prominent citizens, in a series of brief, episodic chapters. Though there is, of course, a ‘story’ about Okonkwo, and many of the episodes are designed to reveal his character, the main concern of Part One is, by using Okonkwo, to give us a detailed picture of the way of life of this people as it had remained unchanged for many generations.

Thus we learn of their crops and how they are planted, of their disputes and how they are settled, of their elaborate social rituals and the ceremonies with which the high-spots of their lives—harvests, marriages, and the like—are celebrated, and also of their highly formalised modes of address and discussion. Most of all, we learn of the way in which their everyday lives are interpenetrated with the otherworld of magic and mystery and of the part played in their lives by superstition and the witch-doctors. Yet the picture given is not of an unhappy society. It is stable, governed by tradition and custom, and if some of their practices may seem ignorant or barbaric to us today, these people lived a life that was strong and firmly knit, and that had its own considerable virtues and values: every man knew his place and what was expected of him and subscribed to a generally accepted system of beliefs.

Okonkwo is very much a man of this old order. He is courageous and brave, a fearless fighter and highly respected in his clan; and he is a strong believer in traditional faith and practices. Moreover, he is hard­ working and determined to make a successful life, very unlike his father, Unoka, who had been more fond of music and merrymaking than of hard work and of gaining the respect of his fellows. Thus, when there is a dispute with a neighbouring village, it is Okonkwo who is sent as ambassador and who becomes the guardian of the hostage, Ikemefuna, who is given to the tribe by way of reparations.

Okonkwo is a man who prefers doing things to being inactive, who prefers manly sports such as wrestling to sitting around feasting. When he has nothing to do he is very irritable and treats his wives and children harshly. Indeed, he is always very stem with them. His son, Nwoye, in particular, is a disappointment to Okonkwo, since he sees him like his own father, but he grows increasingly fond of the hostage, Ikemefuna. It comes as a shock to him, therefore, when one of the elders tells him that the gods have decreed that Ikemefuna is to be sacrificed. By a ruse, Ikemefuna is taken out into the bush and when, without warning, one of the men strikes him, he runs towards Okonkwo whom he sees as his father. There is a critical moment where Okonkwo is tom between his feelings for the boy and his strong sense of duty to the gods, but the latter sense prevails and he strikes Ikemefuna down. In this way we are shown how the traditional ways can often be very brutal; particularly affected by the brutality of this incident is Okonkwo’s more gentle-natured son, Nwoye.

In the remaining chapters of Part One more of the customs of Umuofia are displayed. We see traditional justice being exercised in the settlement of a matrimonial dispute by the assembled elders and the *egwugwu* (masked representatives of the spirits), and Okonkwo takespart in the negotiations for the marriage of his friend Obierika, the whole village participating in the wedding-feast when it eventually takes place. In addition, we leam of Okonkwo’s love for his young daughter, Ezinma, in an incident in which the priestess of the Oracle carries her off in the night to her cave, closely followed by Okonkwo and her mother who wait outside until she is safely returned. At another point she is cured of malaria by Okonkwo, who uses a traditional herbal recipe as a medicine.

The climax of Part One comes in Chapter 13. At the funeral of one of the elders of the village, Okonkwo’s gun explodes, killing the young son of the dead man. To be responsible for the killing of a fellow-tribesman is a major crime and carries with it the automatic penalty of exile. Since the killing was an accident, Okonkwo’s exile is to be for seven years, and, together with his wives and children, he has to leave for his m other’s village of Mbanta. Thus the end of Part One brings to an end Okonkwo’s period of settled life in Umuofia and rudely interrupts his hitherto successful career among his clansmen. When he returns to it again both it and his life will have changed.

Part Two of the novel (Chapters 14-19) covers Okonkwo’s years of exile in Mbanta. During his exile, he is visited by his friend, Obierika, who has been looking after his affairs in Umuofia. From him he learns of how the first white man had arrived in one of the villages and been killed and of how the white men had exacted vengeance for his death by massacring the villagers. Two years later Obierika comes to visit him again. White missionaries have arrived in the district and he has seen Okonkwo’s son, Nwoye, amongst the converts. Most of the remainder of this part shows how the missionaries had come to Mbanta and how their influence had spread, converting first of all the outcasts or those who were otherwise dissatisfied with Ibo society and those who, like Nwoye, felt that the new religion had something to offer them. The spread of Christianity threatens the peace of the land, and this threat leads to the establishment of courts and the white man’s rule of law and order.

Now Okonkwo is estranged from his son. Everything he believed in and the society in which he held an honourable place is threatened, and his natural reaction is to fight in defence of the old order and to drive the white men out by violence. But before he leaves Mbanta to return in, as he thinks, triumph to Umuofia at the end of his period of exile, he holds a great feast for his kinsfolk—a final demonstration of the strengths of the old, the traditional way of life.

Part Three (Chapters 20-5) brings the final, tragic phase of Okonkwo’s story. Returned to Umuofia, he finds that things have indeed changed. A court has been established as well as a mission-school and hospital run by a far-sighted missionary who tries to understand the Ibos and sees that a head-on collision with their culture will be fruitless. When he leaves and is replaced by a more narrow-minded man, trouble is inevitable. When one of the more rabid converts commits the unpardonable crime of unmasking an *egwugwu* during a traditional ceremony, Umuofia explodes and the mission-church is burnt to the ground by the irate populace.

Six of the leading citizens, including Okonkwo, are called to the court-house, where they are arrested, clapped in chains and the com­ munity fined heavily for their misdemeanour. During their detention they are beaten and maltreated by the District Commissioner’s men, who are Ibos from distant tribes. On their release a great assembly of the villagers takes place to discuss what is to be done, and when the Commissioner’s men arrive to stop the meeting, Okonkwo, who has been arguing for violent action, kills one of the messengers. The following day, when men arrive to arrest Okonkwo, they find that he has hanged himself, having preferred the shameful course of taking his own life to submitting to the white man’s justice.