

Kamala Khan

Mr. Roddy Benton

Pre-IB English 2: B1–2

4 March 2024

*Things Fall Apart* Essay: The Manipulative Boyfriend That Is Fear

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe deploys complex characters and narration to expose that, although it may be sometimes rational, fear will ultimately control a person if not properly confronted.

To begin, Achebe demonstrates, time and time again, how Okonkwo's traits as a tragic hero illustrate the grip that fear holds on his life. His most basic fear stems from that of his father, Unoka, not because of what his father did to him, but rather a "fear of himself, lest he should resemble his father" (13). Since Unoka was placid and, his actions led him to die in the Evil Forest, and Okonkwo is "possessed by the fear" that he might end up there (18). This fear motivates him throughout the book, acting as the driving force behind all his actions. It even causes him to kill Ikemefuna, his adoptive son, out of an ironic "[fear] of being thought weak" — a tragic outcome, brought up by his total ignorance of what a true weakness is (61). His perceptions become warped, and the insecurities persist. He also believes that "to show affection [is] as sign of weakness," causing him to be brutal in the treatment of his family, driving away his eldest son (28). Not just Nwoye is affected either as Okonkwo "[rules] his household with a heavy hand," and his wives, although they must love him, live in "perpetual fear of his fiery temper" (13). These silent fears take him to the climax, where Okonkwo, after killing the messenger and realizing Umuofia will not go to war, "[wipes] his machete ... and [walks] away" resigned to no longer live in Umuofia, which has embodied his greatest fear: his shameful father

(205). Okonkwo's own inability to face his fear tears him down, even through the minor highs he achieves. Okonkwo's continual struggle causes so much pain for him and his family, and he simply cannot understand what the real solution is. This leads fear to squeeze its grip over Okonkwo's own neck and proves just how fear hold so much power over those who do nothing to face it.

Furthermore, Achebe foils Nwoye with Okonkwo to juxtapose the dichotomous answers they have to their fears and the impacts of those decisions. Nwoye, in a similar way to Okonkwo, has insecurities stemming from his father, but Nwoye's insecurity is actually a direct result of Okonkwo's unresolved fears. Nwoye seems to take after Unoka, but his "incipient laziness" only goes to remind Okonkwo of Unoka, and Okonkwo beats Nwoye, thinking he can physically beat the aspects of his father out of his son (13). Nwoye's fear is compounded by the often cruel traditions of the Ibo, such as the abandonment of twins, but what makes the greatest impact is the killing of Ikemefuna, causing him to "[snap] like a tightened bow" (61). Nwoye, who had just regained confidence under Ikemefuna's wing, now has that guiding influence ripped away from him, bringing back his anxiety. However, Nwoye's life is fundamentally changed when the missionaries arrive in Mbanta, their hymn seeming to "answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul," and Nwoye eventually joins the church (147). In this way, Achebe clearly foils Nwoye with Okonkwo, showing how Nwoye has confronted his fear, and chooses a path in which he can break free of its grasp. Conversely, the closest thing Okonkwo gets to the answer to his fear is resignation, for he is never quite able to face his insecurity. His pride often does not allow it because even when he thinks about Unoka, he represses the shame by "thinking about his own strength and success" (66). Even after the death of Ikemefuna, which Nwoye had a devastating reaction to, Okonkwo — acknowledging he does feel some semblance of sadness —

then ridicules himself for “becoming a woman” (65). This only does more to fuel Okonkwo’s repression of fear due to the knowledge that his own father was called a woman. Okonkwo feels trapped by his fears, but Nwoye finds freedom from them, illustrating their separate answers: repression and confrontation. Achebe’s masterful foiling warns that even if they are rational, insecurities hold grips over those who cannot face them.

In addition, by developing a narrator with an ever-shifting perspective, Achebe reveals how fear motivates the actions of characters. The white missionaries come from a distant culture, yet they bring with them an automatic fear of the Ibo, specifically Reverend Smith, who “[sees] things black and white[,] and black [is] evil” to him (184). The narration provides his rationale for racism, of which the source is fear, and it motivates Smith to be especially unforgiving towards the Umuofians. The racism is blatant, and Smith’s actions follow that pattern, showing how even racist beliefs continue the power of fear. Okonkwo is scared of the white men and their religion too, for he does not want his culture to be erased although his “prospect of annihilation” is somewhat vain (153). The District Commissioner has similar fears, masked under a guise of “[bringing] civilization” to the natives, and so his ambush of the leaders is totally founded in what the narrator tells us (208). The District Commissioner’s goals in writing a book display the superiority he feels toward Africans, and it invokes a great anger after Okonkwo’s tragic death. Similarly, the narrator steps into the perspective of the village as a whole, displaying the anxiety they hold because of the ambush. “Umuofia [i]s like a startled animal ... not knowing which way to turn,” and this terror motivates them to free their leaders (196). The narrator’s shifting perspective opens windows into how fear can motivate those not fully in its grip. It affects the majority of characters in the story as they continue to battle with their fears. The fear the

Umuofians hold of the white men is grounded in some truth, but it is clearly dangerous to allow that fear to dominate all decisions.

Ultimately, it is evident that in *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe depicts a compelling story in which characters, when they are unable to face their fears, are driven and ruled by their insecurities. However, this does not mean that these characters are evil, or deserve their fates, but that they are human just like the author who wrote them. Humans are naturally driven by fears, it's a survival instinct, but the mark of courage comes from knowing and embracing those fears. Achebe shows us how even a character like Okonkwo, riddled with faults, can be sympathized with, because Achebe masterfully depicts the flawed human person, in all its ironic perfection. Okonkwo commits heinous acts which are driven by fear, and it is important to grasp that and apply it to life and how one interacts with other people. Everyone has fears that drive them, and often all it takes is sympathy to start them on a path to freedom. There are people in positions of power in the world who are also driven by fear, but Achebe does not tell us to still look at them with blind sympathy, but to still criticize them for continuing to not face their fears and better themselves. All people deserve sympathy, but all people deserve criticism as well — for both are necessary to really improve.

Lando Calrissian

Mr. Roddy Benton

Pre-IB English 2: A3–4

4 March 2024

*Things Fall Apart* Essay: Growth from Tragedies

Throughout *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe utilizes Okonkwo as a tragic hero and irony to demonstrate the idea that, although death can be sudden, it influences others to think about the mistakes they have made, and encourages them to live life to the fullest. The death of Okonkwo is a pivotal moment because it causes characters, such as Obierika, to remember Okonkwo and reflect on his actions.

Achebe frequently presents Okonkwo as a tragic hero to demonstrate his memorable actions. Okonkwo “[is] choked with hate” when the messengers hit him on the head and back a few times (195). The messengers are not fond of Okonkwo because he wishes to kill them. Okonkwo feels isolated at this point in time because he is trapped and is forced into jail. Achebe conveys the message of how much hatred consumes Okonkwo, but he is still strong-willed and sticks to his beliefs. When Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna, he does it out of fear because he is “afraid of being thought weak” (61). Achebe intends to show that Okonkwo is not a coward and that he is unafraid to act on his internal thoughts. Okonkwo influences others to go after what they believe and to not let other people’s opinions impact the way he thinks. Unoka, Okonkwo’s father, influences him to be ambitious and determined to be successful. While Okonkwo thinks of his father as a failure, it gives him the courage to be victorious. After the death of Ikemefuna takes place, Okonkwo fasts for two days, and he drinks so much palm wine to the extent that “his eyes [are] red and fierce like the eyes of a rat” (63). Achebe magnifies the way that Okonkwo

feels after executing Ikemefuna and how he's almost in a rut. Okonkwo mourns Ikemefuna's death for two days, and he's reflective about his actions. Okonkwo consistently lives up to what he does and holds himself accountable. Even though Achebe makes it very obvious that Okonkwo is very wrong in his judgment of his father and in his killing of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo's tragic failures here make it clear that death can teach people to reflect on their purpose in life.

All through the book, Achebe also utilizes irony to acknowledge that hardships force people to shed light on their poor decisions and misjudgments. Although Okonkwo is a man of great accomplishments, "he [is still] buried like a dog" (208). Okonkwo's dearest friend has to live knowing that his companion dies with no solidarity. Achebe purposefully makes Okonkwo have an unpleasant burial to depict the insensitiveness of the Commissioner and his officers. This is ironic because Okonkwo holds such a high place in society, and he doesn't deserve this kind of burial. Obierika is loyal to the Ibo teachings; therefore only strangers can bury Okonkwo because he committed suicide. Obierika stays true to his beliefs no matter what the circumstances are. The District Commissioner tricks Okonkwo and the five other men by claiming that "[he and his messengers] shall not do [the six men] any harm" when as a reader we know that the District Commissioner isn't trustworthy (144). It's a form of dramatic irony because as a reader we know how the District Commissioner does not have good intentions and wants to take over the land of Umuofia. He's almost trying to brainwash the six men into thinking that he would never hurt them, but he has done things to prove himself wrong. The District Commissioner mimics a dictator who uses propaganda to gain followers and give himself more power. Achebe expresses that people should grow from the lessons they learn and live in the now. Okonkwo's "body is evil, and only strangers may touch it" for the reason that he takes his own life which is not

accepted in the Ibo culture (207). This is situational irony because one would think that Okonkwo's best friend would not think of his body as evil, but because of the Ibo teachings he considers his body evil. Okonkwo's clansmen are not able to bury him, so a stranger must bury him. Because we understand Okonkwo's motivations, we know from the outside that Okonkwo is not genuinely evil, but the clansmen stay loyal to their beliefs. Multiple times in the plot, Achebe turns mistakes into valuable lessons so that characters can be accepting of them to have a fulfilling life. These conflicts help form the idea that, even though people may be ashamed of their actions, unchangeable tragedies like death can help people move on with their lives and accept reality.

In conclusion, throughout multiple aspects of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe demonstrates that the, since value of lessons to be learned after a death or hardship are prominent, one should make the most of their life. It is tragic how Okonkwo dies, and his people cannot even bury him. The burial of Okonkwo symbolizes the loyalty of Obierika and his clansmen to the Ibo culture. The clansmen of Umuofia always show their dedication to the Ibo culture and teachings. Even if someone, such as the Christian missionaries, tries and persuade them to think otherwise they still stay true to what they believe in. Even today, a student can read this text and consider the challenges in their own life as opportunities to change, grow, or learn more about their own values.

Mike Wazowski

Mr. Roddy Benton

Pre-IB English 2: B3–4

4 March 2024

*Things Fall Apart* Literary Analysis: How Language Affects Communities

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe makes use of metaphors, tonal shifts, and the protagonist's traits as a tragic hero to illustrate that, while the misuse of language can cause problems within a community, language can also unify it.

Achebe incorporates metaphors to show how important language is to the clan's culture and people. He does this in many different ways. In Part One, he explains that "every man learned ... the language of the hollowed-out instrument", the ekwe, which is very important to the Ibo culture (120). This kind of metaphorical language unifies the people of Umuofia, because even though the instrument cannot physically communicate with literal language, it sends a spiritual message that bonding is crucial to the success of a community. In Part Two, a white man comes into the village and attempts to talk to the people, but he speaks so quietly that "he seem[s] to speak through his nose", which makes it hard for them to understand him (139). Achebe includes this description to show the reader the extent of how low the white man was speaking, and how he might have said something important that could have changed the clan adversely, but they would never know because of how softly he speaks. In Part Three, Okonkwo thinks about how the village of Umuofia should fight against the European colonizers. He thinks about the late-great man, Okudo, and how, "his voice turned every man into a lion", which is figuratively represents the power of language (200). Okudo's fierce speeches give every man in Umuofia the courage to fight, which results in a war-like clan. Through this figurative auditory



imagery, Achebe suggests that, while language can cause problems if used improperly, it can also bring people together.

Achebe makes use of tonal shifts to indicate how a community's love and compassion can change its dynamics. In Part One, Okonkwo threatens and scares Ikemefuna, the boy they took in from Mbaino, but Ikemefuna calms down when, "Nwoye's mother ... place[s] her hands on his chest and back" (28). Okonkwo's harsh language makes for a terrifying tone, yet it transitions to loving as Nwoye's mother calms Ikemefuna. Okonkwo's attitude toward Ikemefuna initially causes problems between them; however, Ikemefuna becomes very close to Nwoye's mother as a result of their connection. So, despite Okonkwo's attitude, Ikemefuna feels much safer in their household. At the beginning of Part Three, Achebe describes the relationship between Okonkwo's daughter, Ezinma, and Okonkwo to be very different than it was in Part One. He states that "of all his children she alone understood [Okonkwo's] every mood", which proves how close they became during his exile (172). This is a contrast from Part One when Okonkwo considers Ezinma to be dumb, which one could argue is a judgmental tone. However, in Part Three, their relationship is much more intimate, like a true father-daughter relationship. At the end of Part Three, we learn that the reason for unrest in Umuofia is not due to the white men but due to the clansmen who converted to Christianity. One speaker felt it was necessary to "fight the stranger", and that even though they may "hit [thei]r brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansmen ... [they] must do it"; this tone is confusing because the clansmen's fathers would never have thought about fighting their own people (203). While everyone used to feel connected and happy, they now feel disillusioned by the fact that they are no longer the same clan. All of these tonal shifts are a result of language, and these examples demonstrate how language can connect people but also push people away.

Achebe illustrates the protagonist's traits as a tragic hero to emphasize that a tragic hero's actions do not always represent their true character. In Part One, Ikemefuna has to face a tough fate when "Umuofia ... decide[s] to kill him", and Okonkwo decides that he must be the one to do it (57). This is hard for Okonkwo, especially after the close relationship he has created with Ikemefuna. Ultimately, Okonkwo completes the task which could be interpreted as a sign of his brave and warlike character; however, he wishes that he did not have to be the one to kill an innocent child. In order to keep his status, he does not let anyone know of this silently guilt for fear of being recognized as weak. At the end of Part One, Okonkwo is exiled for accidentally killing Ezeudo's youngest son. Even though it seems like the whole clan hates him, "Obierika and ... other friends c[o]me to help and to console him" which shows that despite Okonkwo's actions, Obierika will always be there for him (124). Maybe something occurred in the past which proved to Obierika that Okonkwo was more than an aggressive, combative man. Nonetheless, their strong friendship demonstrates that this accident does not define Okonkwo's true character. In Part Three, Okonkwo returns after completing his seven-year exile, "kn[o]w[ing] that he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits", which tells the reader that the clan does not fully forgive him (171). Life has changed in Umuofia, but it is obvious the clan's feelings towards Okonkwo have not. In three examples, language is relevant because everyone talks about Okonkwo, and everyone shares differing opinions. The protagonist's traits as a tragic hero portray the idea that language plays a huge role in the opinions of an individual, sometimes resulting in conflict within the community.

To summarize, Achebe utilizes metaphors, tonal shifts, and Okonkwo's tragic qualities to support the idea that, even though language can unite people, it can also tear a community apart. By using metaphors to show the importance of language to Umuofia's culture and people,

readers see how it impacts the community. As a whole, tonal shifts are used throughout the novel in many ways, but in order to show dynamic and familial changes, Achebe must include the dedication of the clan towards its people. Language is used during these tonal shifts to emphasize the changes in tone. Finally, Achebe stresses the protagonist's traits as a tragic hero to suggest that a person is defined by more than just their actions. Okonkwo has made many friends along the way as a result of language. It unifies him with great men — Obierika, for example — but it also separates Okonkwo from other clansmen. The author's goal is to teach the reader the effects of language within communities. In the end, Achebe heightens the importance of language through metaphors, tonal shifts, and the protagonist's tragic traits to present the idea that, while the misuse of language can cause problems within a community, language is also the best hope to unify it.

Atticus Finch

Mr. Roddy Benton

Pre-IB English 2: C1–2

4 March 2024

### Justification of Social Concepts and Constructs in Communities

*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is a novel set in the late 1800s that provides insight into the Igbo villages affected by European assimilation via colonialism in Nigeria. The recurring theme of Christian principles being pushed upon African communities goes to show the effect that missionaries had on those who were unaware, successfully breaking apart their community's bonds. The characters and culture portrayed through this book align with historical events and show readers how a new faith and society can break another. Status, hierarchy, friendship, and the social relationships that come with a community are broken apart and in turn break the people within them. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe makes use of the protagonist's traits as a tragic hero, metaphorical sayings, and figurative imagery to illustrate that respect and status only exist in society as long as they are justified by others.

Achebe uses Okonkwo, the story's protagonist, as a flawed character that possesses traits of a tragic hero to show the imperfection that defines someone who has withstood struggles. His personal experiences are what shape his outlook on life and others, and his constant need to be the best and most powerful are the result of seeing his father, Unoka, become worthless. When his village and people break apart their social ties and status, the loss of the respect from those surrounding him leads to the feeling of worthlessness that causes him to eventually give up when he feels powerless and not respected by others. This "fear or failure ... and of weakness" is what drives him throughout the book and is one of the reasons he is so respected; he would never let

others see him weak (13). This projection of hate towards all things gentle or kind is what becomes a tragic trait in his character. He becomes cruel and spiteful, causing others around him to turn away. He is so driven and violent that when it comes to the end of the novel and Umuofia decides not to fight, he would rather die than stand in surrender. His unrelenting pride and ego is another tragic trait he bears throughout the novel. This stubbornness is shown when he refuses to listen to others and hear differing opinions, even if it is what is best. This becomes extremely important at the end of the novel when it comes to making a decision on whether to fight increasing oppression against their Ibo way of life or to submit. Okonkwo, in his stubbornness, chooses to “go out and avenge himself,” but without the support of one’s society, the choice to “fight alone” is meaningless because it will not have an impactful effect (199, 201). This relates to the idea of the strength of community in that respect and change will only happen when a person has the support of others. Okonkwo’s depression after realizing that their society has fallen apart and that he has lost his respect and status in the eyes of his clan is so severe because of his reliance on being the best and never giving up. When he realizes that his clan has given up, his stubbornness and refusal to submit as well drives him to suicide.

Achebe’s use of metaphorical language demonstrated in their cultural sayings helps visually represent the individual ties held together by a community that is justified by people coming together, as well as explain main points in the book and complex ideas through symbolism and figurative language. These Ibo sayings and stories are a way of expressing morals and lessons as well as relating to key topics of the story on a deeper level. One of these is told by Okonkwo in a flashback and represents his strong sense of individuality and drive. He compares himself to “[t]he lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground [and] said he would praise himself if no one else did” when he speaks to Nwakibie about his character (21).

This shows his strong sense of individuality and how he distinguishes himself from those who do not believe in him. Ironically, as the novel goes on, we see this separation from one's community drive a stick into both relationships and hierarchical status. This can be seen when Okonkwo is cast out of his tribe and separated from his community; those relationships disappear along with the respect that came with them as a result of his individuality. This quotation is from when Okonkwo was young and inexperienced, but by the end of the novel, Okonkwo has come to these realizations. To further the idea that success comes from a strongly connected community, we can see when Obierika is speaking to Okonkwo about the missionaries coming and converting their "own brothers" who have turned against them, he states that the Europeans have "put a knife on the things that held [them] together[,] and [they] have fallen apart" (176). What Obierika is trying to say through this metaphor is that the colonizers came and destroyed the bonds that kept them together, resulting in the dissolution of their community's strength. As shown throughout the book, the longer the missionaries stay and the deeper they settle themselves into the Ibo villages, the less connected the Ibo people are. By the end, they have been destroyed not simply by the outsiders but mostly by their own people who have turned against them and broken their clans from the inside out.

Achebe uses figurative imagery throughout this novel to better detail scenes and tones, as well as provide in-depth descriptions that allow the audience to imagine how ideas are being incorporated. These descriptions are especially used to describe social practices in Ibo culture as well as heavily relate to the topic of Ibo phrases and proverbs. Figurative language is also used a lot to describe the sense of community that the clans experience when they were connected as one in the beginning of the novel. One of these instances is at the great wrestling match during the Feast of the New Yam when the drummers are beating in a "frantic rhythm [that] was no

longer a mere disembodied sound but the very heartbeat of the people” (50). This figurative tactile imagery compares the beating of the drums to the beating of hearts. Achebe is trying to show how connected the people at the celebration are, not only to the music, but through the atmosphere and community. This is a great example of the connectivity that the Ibo clans had before the missionaries came and destroyed it. It supports the theme that connectivity in a community is needed for social concepts to exist. Figurative language is also used to describe the Christian faith, as well as its potential effects on the Ibo clans. It was stated that the converts were called “the excrement of the clan and the new faith was a mad dog that had come to eat it up” by Chielo, the priestess of Agbala (143). This comparison uses figurative language to talk in a derogatory manner about Christianity and its effects on the culture and religion of the Ibo. It does this by comparing it first to something disgusting and then to something with malicious intent. This way, readers are able to make those connections and mentally picture the spread of religious assimilation. This, as well as the description of “those gay and rollicking tunes of evangelism which had the power of plucking at silent and dusty chords in the heart of an Ibo man,” both show the impact of Christian practices of conversion and culture (146). This scene where the missionaries begin singing uses figurative language to describe how affected the clansmen were by the rhythmic, lyrical songs. Both of these examples relate to the recurring theme of the process of Christian assimilation breaking apart already established Ibo customs. The description by Chielo explains how the missionaries are breaking apart their community, while the description of the effect of the songs depicts a scene that captures one of the reasons the Ibo people were converting: they are captivated and intrigued. These people being converted is one of the reasons why their society — and with it the social structure and respect they held

for each other — breaks down. Achebe's, figurative imagery effectively details the loneliness and deprivation of status that comes with the loss of a community to justify one's worth.

The importance of community finds its relevance not only in the clan illustrated by Achebe throughout *Things Fall Apart* but in any setting that involves the social bonds that people experience. Achebe's emphasis on how easily a community can be broken apart through literary elements in the novel provides a deeper understanding for the audience. Figurative imagery, Okonkwo's traits as a tragic hero, and metaphorical language all help convey that respect and social concepts can only exist when collectively justified by a community. The strength and connectivity in a community is extremely important when it comes to support and structure. In this novel — and in any community — unity is vital to survival. If the members of a community let something tear them apart or turn them against each other, they have broken the bonds that they built themselves up on, and in turn their society will crumble. As Okika said, “[the Ibo converts] have broken the clan” through their disloyalty (203). Because respect is not material and is earned, when you turn your back on your own people, you lose that respect and trust that you hold for one another. One of the most important takeaways from *Things Fall Apart* is that the doubt and separation of the individuals in a society that cause its divisions also cause the loss of those ties and bonds that come with it.