

# Literary Analysis of a Novel

## INTRODUCTION

Title and author

Background information

Thesis statement

## BODY

Background information from novel

More background information from novel

Major point  
Character attribute:  
fear of failure

Literary evidence for first character attribute

### Fear and Tradition:

#### Analyzing Character in Things Fall Apart

In Things Fall Apart Chinua Achebe tells a masterful story of an Ibo farmer living in Nigeria at the end of the nineteenth century. This self-made man has passed through a modest childhood to become a prosperous and respected leader. Although he is known throughout the land for his fearlessness, it is his fear and resistance to change that leads this proud but flawed farmer to sow the seeds of his own destruction.

Through physical strength, determination, and personal achievement, Achebe's main character, Okonkwo, has risen to a prominent position in his clan. "He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two intertribal wars" (5).

Even as a boy, Okonkwo shows great promise. Echoing a timeless lament, an elder tells the young Okonkwo, "It pleases me to see a young man like you these days, when our youth has gone so soft" (18). It is not surprising that Okonkwo has done well; he takes great pleasure in working and would rather work than do almost anything else.

In fact, Okonkwo is afraid *not* to work. He is obsessed with his father's failure. His father, Unoka, is a gentle man who prefers playing the flute to cultivating crops. Unoka's gentleness, idleness, and heavy debts lead to a life of poverty and a disgraceful death. "Lest he should

# Literary Analysis of a Novel *continued*

Elaboration on meaning

Major point  
Character attribute:  
fear of losing control

Literary evidence for second attribute

Elaboration on meaning

Major point  
Character attribute:  
fear of weakness

Literary evidence for third attribute

Summary

be found to resemble his father" (10), Okonkwo is determined to prove himself industrious. This fear resurfaces when Okonkwo's son Nwoye exhibits several of Unoka's qualities. Angered that Nwoye is lazy, Okonkwo calls his son "degenerate and effeminate." Okonkwo wonders how he, a real man, could "have begotten a woman for a son" (133). Okonkwo hopes his unyielding drills in manliness will influence his son to grow into a tough, hard-working man. Instead, they alienate Nwoye and send him on a quest for a gentler community.

Fear leads Okonkwo to treat other members of the family harshly as well. "His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children" (10). Okonkwo beats his wives and shouts at his children even when he is well aware that they are innocent. He is even willing to break the rules of the clan to prove his authority. During the Week of Peace, when clan members are not allowed to quarrel, Okonkwo beats his wife harshly. A priest warns Okonkwo that breaking the tradition "can ruin the whole clan" (26). Still, Okonkwo struggles with his fear that any sign of weakness will cause him to lose control of his wives and children.

In affairs of the clan, Okonkwo is overly concerned with strength. His fear of appearing weak controls many of his actions. Okonkwo fights fiercely as a wrestler (1), he kills five men in intertribal wars (56), and he is the first to bring home a human head as a trophy (8). Okonkwo is even willing to kill someone he loves to prove his strength. When an

# Literary Analysis of a Novel *continued*

Elaboration on meaning

Major point  
Character attribute:  
fear of expressing emotion

Literary evidence for fourth attribute

More literary evidence for fourth attribute

Elaboration on meaning

oracle decides that Ikemefuna, a boy who lives with Okonkwo's family, is to be killed, Okonkwo delivers the deadly blow even though the elders have warned him against any involvement. His fear of weakness again outweighs his commitment to the clan and leads him to make poor decisions.

Okonkwo is afraid to express positive emotions. He believes that "affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength" (24). In building his story, however, Achebe is careful to hint at a softer side to his main character. After Ikemefuna's death, Okonkwo is unable to eat or sleep for several days and succumbs to a deep depression (55). Despising his own emotional display, Okonkwo scolds himself:

When did you become a shivering old woman . . . you who are known in all the nine villages for your valor in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number?

Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed. (56)

Again, when Okonkwo's daughter falls ill, Okonkwo's compassion is made apparent as he runs to Ezinma's hut to care for her (66). Later, when the same daughter is taken away by a priestess, Okonkwo secretly spends the night worrying about the girl and comforting his wife by waiting beside her for the daughter's return. Unfortunately, these emotions and acts of compassion are private, shared only among select members of the family.

# Literary Analysis of a Novel *continued*

Major point  
Character attribute:  
resistance to change

Literary evidence for  
fifth attribute

Elaboration on  
meaning

CONCLUSION

Restatement of thesis

If Okonkwo's fears are the seeds of his destruction, the arrival of colonialism is the fertile soil. Okonkwo greets change with violent resistance. When British missionaries arrive to gather followers, Okonkwo's first response is to arm the clan. He is infuriated when the clan instead decides to take conciliatory measures in dealing with the newcomers (139). He is further provoked when Nwoye, his son, joins the new religion. Okonkwo curses him, saying, "To abandon the gods of one's father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination" (133). In his fury he fails to see that Nwoye has left his family because of Okonkwo's extreme temperament—the very trait Okonkwo cultivated after rejecting his own father.

The clan begins to accept the changes brought by British colonialism, but Okonkwo resists change at every step. He resorts to violence at any perceived threat to his culture or values. It is this violent resistance that seals Okonkwo's fate. When a messenger of the British government attempts to break up a meeting of villagers, Okonkwo chops off the man's head in hopes that the clan will follow his lead (176). However, the clan is stunned by Okonkwo's brutality, and Okonkwo faces his shame alone.

In an interview about *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe once quoted an Ibo proverb, "You can stand in the house of a coward and point to where a brave man once stood." In Okonkwo's attempt to prove himself a brave man, his fear becomes evident. As the great

## Literary Analysis of a Novel *continued*

Clincher

tragedy of his demise is revealed at the novel's end, Okonkwo's earlier description of the "white man" comes to mind: "He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (152).

# Literary Analysis of a Novel

## Definition

A **literary analysis of a novel** is a careful examination of the elements that make the novel work. A good literary analysis looks at literary elements such as conflict, plot, and character to show the depth of the writer's understanding of the work.

Many literary analyses use the structure illustrated in the framework below. Print this framework and use it as a guide when you write your own literary analysis.

## Framework

## Directions and Explanations

**Introduction**

- Give the author and the title of the literary work.
- Note relevant background information.
- Include a clear thesis statement.

**Set the stage** Offer readers a sense of context by including background information about the author and the time period represented in the novel.

**Get to the point** Provide a clear thesis so readers can judge how well your evidence supports your claim.



**Body**

- Elaborate on the major points of the thesis.
- Include literary evidence from the text and/or secondary sources.

**Support your thesis** Cover your major points in the order that makes the most sense for your particular thesis, either chronologically or in order of importance.

**Present your evidence** Provide quotations, summaries, and paraphrases from the novel to support your major points. Don't forget to include citations for each. Also, make clear connections between your evidence and the points the evidence supports.



**Conclusion**

- Restate your thesis and major points.

**Pull it together** Restate your thesis in a fresh way and end with a clincher—a relevant observation or a quotation from the novel.