

# Parents' Guide to *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

**Grade Level:** 12 (AP Literature)

**Lexile Level:** 970L

**Genre:** Literary Fiction/Historical Fiction

**Publisher:** Dover

**ISBN:** 978-0486264646

**Page Count:** ~72 pages

## About the Book

*Heart of Darkness* follows the journey of Charles Marlow, a sailor who travels deep into the Congo River basin in search of an enigmatic ivory trader named Kurtz. As Marlow ventures further into the African interior, he confronts the brutal realities of European imperialism and the psychological cost of unchecked power. Joseph Conrad's novella is a foundational work of modern literature, exploring themes of civilization, savagery, and moral ambiguity.

## Educational Value

This novel supports key literacy and social-emotional learning goals:

- **Historical Awareness:** *Heart of Darkness* critically examines European imperialism and its dehumanizing impact.
- **Literary Analysis:** The novella teaches modernist techniques such as unreliable narration, symbolism, allusion, and frame narrative.
- **Ethical Inquiry:** The book encourages reflection on moral hypocrisy, exploitation, and psychological conflict.
- **Cross-Curricular Engagement:** This novel connects to world history (colonialism), psychology (identity, madness), and religion (human dignity, morals and ethics).

## Discussion Topics for Home

- How does Conrad portray imperialism—as a civilizing mission or a corrupting force?
- What does the journey into the jungle—both Marlow's and Kurtz's—symbolize about human nature?
- How can modern readers approach the book's racial depictions and language?
- The indigenous people in the Congo are treated as subhuman. How does this violate Catholic teaching based in [Genesis 1:27](#) on the inherent dignity of every person?
- Marlow hesitates to act or speak at critical moments. According to [James 4:17](#), what is the cost of moral inaction?
- Marlow is both horrified by and complicit in the system he witnesses. According to St. Paul in [Romans 7:19-20](#), how can sin trap individuals and societies into these systemic patterns?

## Why We're Reading *Heart of Darkness*

Though controversial, *Heart of Darkness* remains a profound critique of power, exploitation, and the thin veneer of civilization. Reading this novella, particularly in tandem with our other AP Literature summer reading selection, *Things Fall Apart*, helps students grapple with difficult historical truths, literary complexity, and the enduring relevance of colonial legacies. Guided discussion in the first days of school will ensure students critically engage with both *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart* with regard to perspective, complexity, and literary merit.

# Parents' Guide to *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe

**Grade Level:** 12 (AP Literature)

**Lexile Level:** 890L

**Genre:** Literary Fiction/Historical Fiction

**Publisher:** Penguin

**ISBN:** 978-0385474542

**Page Count:** ~209 pages

## About the Book

*Things Fall Apart* tells the story of Okonkwo, a respected Igbo leader in pre-colonial Nigeria, whose world begins to unravel with the arrival of British colonizers and Christian missionaries. Through Okonkwo's personal struggles and the broader societal shifts, Chinua Achebe offers a powerful, African-centered perspective on colonialism, cultural identity, and change. The novel is a foundational work of African literature and post-colonial studies.

## Educational Value

This novel supports key literacy and social-emotional learning goals:

- **Historical and Cultural Awareness:** *Things Fall Apart* gives students insight into traditional Igbo life and the impact of colonialism from an African perspective.
- **Literary Analysis:** The novel introduces complex characters, symbolism, and narrative structure that contrast oral and written storytelling traditions.
- **Ethical Exploration:** The story challenges students to reflect on justice, tradition, masculinity, and cultural conflict.
- **Cross-Curricular Engagement:** This novel connects to history (imperialism), religion (world religions, morals and ethics), and sociology (culture and identity).

## Discussion Topics for Home

- How does Okonkwo's upbringing shape his values and choices?
- What are the strengths and limitations of Igbo society as portrayed in the novel?
- How does colonialism affect both individual characters and the larger community?
- Why is it important to seek out and interact with history from diverse cultural viewpoints?
- Some of the missionaries in the book (like Mr. Brown) build bridges, while others (like Mr. Smith) cause division. According to [Romans 12:15-21](#), what kind of evangelization reflects Christ?
- Okonkwo's fate is tragic, but not inevitable. How does [Galatians 6:7-8](#) highlight the weight of Okonkwo's moral choices?
- Okonkwo's downfall is largely tied to his pride. How do [Proverbs 16:18](#) and [Luke 14:11](#) reflect Okonkwo's classic tragic arc? What would true strength and leadership look like in Christ's model?

## Why We're Reading *Things Fall Apart*

Achebe's novel provides a crucial counter-narrative to colonial-era literature (like our other AP Literature summer reading selection, *Heart of Darkness*) by centering African voices and values. Students gain a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity, historical complexity, and the legacy of imperialism. *Things Fall Apart* helps foster global empathy, critical thinking, and literary analysis skills essential for AP Literature students. Together with *Heart of Darkness*, students will begin the year with a complex and nuanced discussion of perspective, complexity, and literary merit.