

Dear Mr. Achebe,

I recently read your novel *Things Fall Apart* for my English class. At first I thought it would be just a boring waste of time, but I soon realized it was a very poignant and personal story. Although it may sound odd for a middle-class American teenager to be able to identify with Nigerian tribal farmers, I can relate to Okonkwo and Nwoye. I understand the pressure they face, the pressure to conform to social rules of masculinity and power. Planting yams in their culture is actually rather similar to playing sport in ours. From Okonkwo's mistakes and Nwoye's courage I learned to ignore what I believe others may think of me and just be myself.

High school is a cut-throat dog-eat-dog world. Only a certain number of people can gain the honor of being called "popular," and if you choose to join the drama club over the football team, you've lost your shot at that title. In the cafeteria, if you sit at the table on the right (the nerd table) rather than the table on the left (the cool table), you automatically subject yourself to ridicule. I've often stood in the cafeteria contemplating whom to sit with, the cool kids or the nerds. The cool kids are for the most part immature and judgmental; it was they who created the social pyramid and decided what was cool and what wasn't. The nerds, I've come to realize, are the one who actually deserve to be looked up to. They act themselves, being as loud as they please and not caring what the world thinks of them. However, as much as I'd like to sit with them, that could potentially destroy my image. So I usually just end up sitting at the table in the middle.

When reading *Things Fall Apart*, I couldn't help but be reminded of that social pyramid. Unoka was like a drama nerd and Okonkwo fought the way (through blood and toil and even murder) to climb the pyramid and "join the football team," so to speak. All just for his image. There turned out to be no hope for Okonkwo, but Nwoye still had the courage to be himself. Even though Okonkwo saw him as weak, Nwoye continued to do what he wanted. Ironically, Nwoye is the strong one and Okonkwo is the coward. I sometimes wonder if the "popular" kids are actually like Okonkwo; is it all just a façade to hide their personal insecurities? Since reading the book, I've aspired to be more of a Nwoye than an Okonkwo.

I can honestly say that *Things Fall Apart* helped change my lifestyle. How my actions and interests affect my image no longer matters; only how they affect my personal wants and needs. Now when I'm in the cafeteria, I can easily sit at the table on the left, not the nerd table but the honest table. They don't care about their image; image isn't important. They are the Nwoyes, the people who do what feels right despite the judgment and ridicule directed at them. I've always been too scared to do that, though I've always wanted to. I've decided to audition for the school musical this spring, which is something I've always wanted to do but never have because of my fear of embarrassment. I always thought that people would laugh at me, but I realized that's all in my head, similar to Okonkwo's belief that if he didn't fight people and plant yams he would be scoffed at. I can now face my fears and follow my dreams without fearing what others think of me because of what I've learned from your great novel, *Things Fall Apart*.

*Matt D'Innocenzo*