
Okonkwo As A Tragic Hero

The first Aristotle's criterion of the tragic hero requires that the character must be noble or a man of high status. In that sense, as described by Achebe, "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements" (Achebe, 3). Starting as a sharecropper with no inheritance from his father, Okonkwo works very hard and makes his way to a wealthy and respected man of titles in Umuofia. From his hard work, Okonkwo has 3 wives with many children, a large compound with obi for each of his wives and a large stock of yams. Okonkwo earns himself respect from people both inside his clan and outside his clan through many of his achievements. When he is a young man of eighteen, he brings honor to his village by throwing the Amalinze the Cat, a wrestler who is undefeated for 7 years. In addition, Okonkwo is one of the nine Ekwugwu, a respected judge in the community who is believed to be the spirit of the ancestor. Furthermore, Okonkwo is also chosen by his village to be their representative to negotiate with Mbaino village about the murderer of an Umuofia girl in Mbaino market. With ease, Okonkwo successfully brings back a boy and a virgin as compensation and ends the conflict peacefully, without any confrontation.

Similar to other tragic heroes, Okonkwo also has a tragic flaw, which is a fear of weakness and failure. While the fear of failure and weakness drives Okonkwo to work hard and helps him earn his fame and achievements, on the other hand, it also causes him many problems. Many times throughout Okonkwo's life, his fear of failure and weakness leads him to act harshly, violently and impulsively toward other people, including his family members. Okonkwo is always harsh and violent with his family members because he doesn't want to be seen as a weak person. Okonkwo solves his problems only by the use strength and violence and it is this attitude that leads Okonkwo to several conflicts within his family, his failings and ultimately, his downfall. For instance, Okonkwo violates the clan rule and beats his youngest wife during the week of peace and almost shoots his second wife who comments on his gun skill. Moreover, Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna, Nwoye's close friend whom Nwoye calls "brother" who asks for Okonkwo's help because "He was afraid of being thought weak" (Achebe, 43). By trying to be a strong person and deciding to kill Ikemefuna and beats his wives, Okonkwo not only weakens his relationship with his wives and Nwoye, but also hurts himself mentally. Most important, his violent and impulsive characteristics lead him to kill a court messenger from during the clan meeting which soon after leads Okonkwo to the discovery of his own tragic fate.

The last Aristotle's criterion for being a tragic hero requires that the character must discover his fate by his own actions. Okonkwo's self-realization starts when he comes back to Umuofia after his seven years exile with a great plan. However, after his arrival, he realizes that Umuofia is much changed and he is not as important and famous as he used to be before his exile. His arrival doesn't attract as much as attention as he expect and he loses his place in the Ekwugwu to the another man as soon as he leaves the clan. Moreover, he also has to wait for another two years to imitate his two sons into the ozo society. But most important, Okonkwo discovers that the white men have settled down in the village. The white men establish a church and a school in the village, and then start converting Igbo people into Christian and attacking Igbo customs and faith. Okonkwo is strongly unhappy with this situation and by his violent nature; he persuades his clan to use violence to drive the white men out of the village. However,

the clan disagrees and reminds Okonkwo that the white men also have some of the clan members supporting them. Although there is no war between white men and Igbo people, the conflicts between these two groups still often occur, including the unmasking of Ekwugwu, the burning of the church and the deceptive meeting held by the white men which results in the capture and humiliation of the five clan members, including Okonkwo. However, despite these failings, it is not until when Okonkwo kills one of the five court members, who are sent to stop the clan meeting that he discovers his tragic fate. When Okonkwo beheads the messenger during the clan meeting and sees that none of his clan members go after the escaping white men, "He knew that Umuofia would not go to war" (Achebe, 144). He realizes that he will never be able to drive the white men out of Umuofia because his clan will not fight with him. Realizing that he is defeated and cannot save his village from the white men influences, Okonkwo decides to hang himself, which is considered as an abomination in Igbo culture.

Okonkwo's character greatly fits the Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero. From nothing, he rises to the honorable and successful leader of Umuofia. He also has a tragic flaw of a fear of weakness and failure that leads to him to several failings and ultimately, his suicide. Finally, he discovers his own tragic fate because of his impulsive murder of court messenger during the clan meeting. Although Okonkwo starts his life as a successful man of Umuofia but because of his violent and impulsive characteristics, even the most successful man like Okonkwo can still fall from his grace.