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Question #7

### Okonkwo and the Tragic Hero

On the surface, Okonkwo appears to be the typical tragic hero—a man of greatness brought down by a flaw in his character and by unbeatable fate. But certain aspects of the novel, most significantly his suicide at the end of the novel, suggest a more ambiguous role for Okonkwo. The lack of self-discovery and of moral resolution at the end cast uncertainty as to whether his character is really a tragic hero, in the classical meaning, or merely an unfortunate victim of circumstance.

Chinua Achebe clearly states the main character flaw of Okonkwo: “But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness...It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father.” (13) It is this fear that leads Okonkwo to work hard and to accumulate the material possessions that he needs to justify his manhood—titles, honors, wives, and a good yam harvest. Yet this fear also causes him to suppress such “feminine” emotions as gentleness and empathy. As a result, he tends to use violence as an outlet for his frustrated emotions—such as “wrestling during his youth and later becoming a renowned warrior.” Indeed, “Okonkwo was not a man of thought but of action.” (69) Ironically, while this violence earns him the respect of many villages, it leads to his exile and ultimately to his death.

Due to his fear, Okonkwo commits numerous transgressions against social and natural laws that contribute to the tragic destruction of his character. For example, he beats Ojiugo, his third wife, during the Week of Peace dedicated to the Earth goddess Ani. Although his offense carries much significance to the religious well-being of the clan, Okonkwo is “not the man to stop beating someone half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess.” (30) He is motivated by an even greater fear that clouds his judgment and distorts his priorities. For him, showing personal strength is more important than showing deference to a goddess.

In addition, Okonkwo participates in the sacrifice of his adopted son, Ikefuma, who he loved as his own son. He believes that this will show strength, for “he was afraid of being thought weak.” (61) Yet through his participation Okonkwo disrupts the sacred natural order—fathers are not supposed to kill their sons. His good friend Obierika confronts him on this matter. “What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families.” (67) Yet whatever inward remorse he may feel, Okonkwo shows none of it to his friend.

The transgression that really marks the turning point in the life of Okonkwo is when his gun explodes at a funeral for an old warrior, killing a young clansman. Because the death is accidental, Okonkwo is forced into exile for seven years, rather than facing permanent exile. Nevertheless, once again a crime is committed against the Earth goddess, and once again Okonkwo is responsible. This time, however, he severely hinders his aspirations of achieving prosperity and the highest titles of the clan, and must start anew in the village of Mbanta, his motherland. At this point, a new element enters the novel that is beyond the control of Okonkwo. As fate would have it, white Christian missionaries arrive and begin converting some of the villagers. At first the converts represent the refuse and outcasts of the clan. However, the religion spreads up the social ladder, and eventually claims Nwoye, the oldest son of Okonkwo, as one of its own proselytes. It is the fear-driven harshness and severity of his father that causes the boy to find relief and belonging in Christianity. So when Okonkwo states that Nwoye is “no longer my son” (172), he symbolically kills his second son, and further destroys his family and himself.

When Okonkwo is allowed to return to his fatherland after seven long years, he finds that the presence of the white men has changed the attitude of a once proud and warlike village. After an unjust trial and humiliating treatment in the newly erected colonial court, Okonkwo kills a court messenger who interferes with a gathering of the clansmen, breaking the newly established law. Rather than being supported for taking revenge and going on the offensive, he hears doubt and hesitation in the voices of his fellow clansmen. At this final display of weakness and failure to take action, he knows that the spirit of the clan is dead, and so is his own spirit. Thus, he hangs himself on a bush. A man once powerful and prosperous, with a voice in the tribe, has now been reduced to a silent desecration of the land.

However, despite these examples of the elements of tragedy—a self-destructive character flaw and merciless fate leading to downfall—the conclusion itself is not tragic. One of the classical properties of a tragedy is that the novel culminates in the self-discovery or moral revelation of the tragic hero. Okonkwo achieves neither. He fails to recognize the fear that motivates him and thus is unable to assess his errors and wrongs with a new understanding. He does not comprehend that his weakness is his fear of weakness. Okonkwo blames his personal god for his losses and setbacks, believing that it “was not made for great things” (131) yet consistently offends the Earth goddess and the clan without considering the punishments. For all of his suffering, there is no remorse, no realization, no resolution.

Even the clan has no restoration of order. The leadership is indecisive, if not collapsing, and one of the greatest men is dead. The warriors of the clan hesitate to fight, even as the ominous presence of the white men looms ever near. The traditional religious beliefs are succumbing to Christianity, and the authority, if not existence, of the old gods remains unclear for the next generation. The novel concludes with chaos and confusion, as there is no reestablishment of social or cosmic order. All of Umuofia seems to fall apart. Another aspect of tragedy, according to Aristotle, is catharsis—the purgation of fear and pity experienced by the reader at the conclusion. However, the suicide at the end of the novel simply evokes even more pity through the unresolved ignorance and despair of Okonkwo. Okonkwo does not achieve a sense of completion, and thus, neither does the reader.

So, it remains unclear whether Okonkwo is really a tragic hero in the classical sense. There are many examples to support this claim, yet there are also several issues demonstrating that he is merely an unfortunate man who meets a sad and untimely demise. Perhaps Okonkwo then, in all of his complexity and contradictions, is a character who defies such attempts at categorization in a book that does not follow the formulaic model.