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Okonkwo: Epic Hero, Tragic Hero, Neither, or Both?

In Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe, the protagonist, Okonkwo, does not fall neatly under the definitions of epic hero or tragic hero. Instead he uniquely blends two personas that Achebe employs to challenge readers' preconceptions. Okonkwo both possesses and lacks key characteristics of an epic and a tragic hero.

In the first two chapters of Things Fall Apart the reader quickly appreciates Okonkwo's traits of an epic hero. Okonkwo is a superhuman; stronger, braver, and more determined than an ordinary person. The narrator describes Okonkwo's triumphant rise from poverty and disgrace to become one of the most prominent and powerful men in his village. These superior abilities are key aspects of an epic hero. Furthermore, like traditional epic heroes, Okonkwo often witnesses the divine world interfering with his own. Throughout the novel, evidence that Okonkwo is an epic hero emerges when the clan Gods and their human oracles play with Okonkwo's fate and emotions. As examples, the Oracle orders Ikemefuna's execution, resulting in Okonkwo's deep depression, and his tribe banishes him for violating the Earth Goddess through an accidental murder.

Yet despite his superhuman qualities and divine world connections, Okonkwo lacks a number of crucial epic hero characteristics. Importantly, he does not, through thought or action, portray the values of his society. Although the people of Umuofia respect Okonkwo for his strength and determination, he is notably violent and unable to accept weakness in himself or others. The village elders scold him for beating his wife during the week of peace and reprimand him for striking down Ikemefuna in the forest, something he expressly was asked not to do. Okonkwo's mental separation from the village is best illustrated in the climax of the novel when, feeling that his people stand ready to rebel against the white colonists, he slays a court messenger sent to order a meeting of clansmen to desist. Okonkwo expects his action to incite the uprising but discovers to his horror that the villagers refuse to take up the fight. In this instance, he proves not to be an epic hero. Also unlike a classic epic hero, Okonkwo works to excise his inner demons rather than identifying a common goal for which to fight. He is not motivated by the dire needs of those under his protection but he instead pursues personal goals. Furthermore, in the end, Okonkwo dies in disgrace, committing

suicide. This deems him unclean in the village and concludes a story that does not end in triumph, differing notably from traditional epic tales. These facts lead to the conclusion that Okonkwo is not an epic hero.

A strong case can be made that Okonkwo be considered a tragic hero. The tragic hero is marked by a tragic flaw that dooms him or her to fall dramatically from grace and most commonly experience a tragic death. Such is the case with Okonkwo. Achebe's protagonist is a man forever attempting to rid his mind and body of any hint of femininity or weakness. Okonkwo's father was Okonkwo's greatest embarrassment; a poor, lazy, heavily indebted pacifist. Thus Okonkwo molded himself as the polar opposite -- hardworking, successful, and violent. His intolerance of incompetence and quick temper plague Okonkwo throughout his life. This tragic flaw leads him to beat his wives and drive away his son. He even kills Ikemefuna, one he cares for above his own son, due to an inability to accept the "feminine" love felt for his young adoptee. Ultimately Okonkwo's tragic flaw motivates him to lash out violently and disgrace his reputation in the village by murdering an unarmed white man. Unwilling to become prisoner to another, he then ends his own life. Okonkwo's tragic flaw propels him to a tragic end and identifies him as a tragic hero.

However much of Okonkwo's story portrays him as a tragic hero there are notable aspects of the story that decry this assertion. A critical aspect of tragic heroes that Okonkwo lacks completely is noble birth. Indeed, Okonkwo's childhood is distinguished by the poverty into which he was born. Tragic heroes almost always are born into nobility such that after their dramatic fall they end up far worse than how they began. Also, tragic heroes, in their moment of collapse, realize they have made an irreversible mistake due to their tragic flaw. Okonkwo never admits his error of killing the white man and goes to his grave without giving any sign of reconciliation for his actions. Finally, tragic heroes accept their death with honor. Okonkwo, unable to endure the punishment prescribed for his crime, hangs himself and dies without honor. Okonkwo is not born into nobility, does not admit his own failure, and dies without honor. Therefore the reader must conclude that Okonkwo is not a tragic hero.

In Things Fall Apart, Okonkwo is not a protagonist that Achebe portrays within a specific hero category. Rather, the author masterfully blends strands of the epic hero with those of the tragic hero so as to create a persona that fascinates the reader. The fact that Okonkwo possesses key traits of both an epic and a tragic hero is as clear as the fact that he also lacks requisite traits. Therefore, Okonkwo truly cannot be considered a hero of either kind.