

Terrance Fedigan
College of Arts and Sciences
Study Question #7

At times, it is a bit overwhelming to be placed in the mind of Okonkwo, the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's new-age epic *Things Fall Apart*. Bold, brash, intimidating, majestic, and stern, Okonkwo is a renowned wrestler and physical paragon, an expert planter and a revered clansman. The word "hero" immediately jumps out at the reader, as Okonkwo's weighty being soon becomes the focus of this African parable, due both to storytelling reasons and the thickness of his presence. But what could describe his heroism? Is he an epic hero, doomed to bear a heavy cross, but also fated to persevere? Is he a tragic hero, deflated by some insurmountable weakness? Okonkwo, it turns out, is neither. There is nothing triumphant in his final destination, and there are too many flaws to qualify him as a tragic hero. Okonkwo is so riddled by weaknesses and so selfish and foolish that the moniker "hero" seems a vapid capsule in light of his utter humanity, from which he tries to escape.

That is not to say that Okonkwo does not have noble ambitions, and it's difficult not to root for him at times. He is of a dying breed: the traditional, patriarchal clansmen who preserve the customs of their ancestors and faithfully observe established practices. A fissure can already be seen growing between the younger and older generations. Okonkwo is very ambitious and a hard worker, due in large part to his stormy childhood and inept father, Unoka, who was "lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow" (Achebe 4). Titleless and heavily in debt, Unoka died while Okonkwo was young, leaving him to care for himself and forcing him to maintain his own farm before Okonkwo reached adulthood. Okonkwo's resentment of his father breeds determination, a good work ethic, and independence in Okonkwo. Skilled at wrestling, an adept farmer, and a fierce warrior, Okonkwo quickly rises in the ranks of his village, Umuofia.

However, Okonkwo is also arrogant, proud, obstinate, and chauvanistic. His household is structured on the superiority of Okonkwo and fear of his wrath, instead of love. His wives and children "lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper" (13). The modicum of affection he holds in his heart, which he very rarely showcases, is easily overpowered by the more dominant feelings of the necessity of strength over weakness, impassiveness over tenderness, and reason over emotion. His love for the only child whom he shows any warmth toward, his daughter

Ezinma, is limited by the fact that she is not a male.

Okonkwo's downfall ultimately results from his reliance on fear as a source of stability and power. Indeed, "his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness" (13). His fear of weakness takes precedence even over his own family. When Ikemefuna, Okonkwo's adopted son from a neighboring village who was forced to live in Umuofia as a sacrifice, is sentenced to death by the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, Okonkwo is told not to "bear a hand in his death" (57). As Okonkwo accompanies the men of the village on this task, Ikemefuna, who is under the impression that he's returning home, calls out to his father for help after being struck by a machete. Like a panicked animal, Okonkwo, "dazed with fear," cuts him down himself because "He was afraid of being thought weak" (61). Like the palm-wine that he imbibes, Okonkwo slakes his insecurity with the draught of fear. Fear, however, is a poison and one that eats the soul.

When Okonkwo is sentenced to live in his mother's village as punishment for defying the wishes of the Oracle, things rapidly fall apart. Europeans encroach onto Umuofia territory, and Christianity is introduced to the community, winning many converts. Okonkwo's culture unravels, and when he returns from exile, he is virtually powerless. The Umuofia people are being torn apart by this new religion and the European interlopers. Okonkwo tries to ignite the spirit of war within his people, but to no avail. Umuofia's leaders are imprisoned and shamed, and Okonkwo sinks into desperation, killing a European guard who had humiliated Okonkwo and the village leaders. Ashamed, depressed, downtrodden, and beaten, Okonkwo hangs himself.

The little sympathy and solidarity that can be drawn by the reader from Okonkwo's sad story finds its source not in Okonkwo himself, but in the destruction of the African culture in which he is submerged. The epic backdrop is certainly present in *Things Fall Apart*, but its hero is missing. It was inevitable that the African way of life would erode as the Europeans encroached onto the continent, but Okonkwo's dignity did not have to slip away with it. Okonkwo confused pride with dignity, and in his quest for hero status, he rejected his humanity. Instead, he should have embraced it. For it is those who embrace their humanity, and the dignity, love, and compassion to which they are inherent, that become the true heroes worthy of epic lionization.