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### A New Hero

To merely call someone a *hero* is to present many ambiguities. To the Ancient Greeks, from whose word *heros* we derive our English equivalent, a hero was a mighty warrior, so valiant and strong as to have conspired or clashed with the gods themselves—or even so great in reputation as to have earned a place in their family tree. Achilles, Hercules, Perseus—all were more than merely mortal, and they have indeed been immortalized, captured by Western literature to be appreciated of hundreds of generations. We also look to the literature of Ancient Greece for our archetypal tragic hero. It is not surprising, then, that Chinua Achebe, whose explicit aim is to provide a voice for the African experience, should look not to Western tradition in building Okonkwo, the ill-fated protagonist in *Things Fall Apart*, but rather invent something that is entirely his own. Certainly, one may examine Okonkwo using these Western archetypes as a device to better understand him, but it is perhaps more enlightening to consider why he should *not* be grouped with the likes of Perseus or Oedipus.

Inasmuch as he was fierce in battle and in reputation, a Greek Okonkwo would easily have earned a place in Elysium. Indeed, he was the victor in “one of the fiercest [fights] since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights” (1). In the ensuing years, his “fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan” (1). Certainly these are great things for a hero to do. However, an *epic hero* is more than a warrior. Consider, for example, Odysseus. Though he is critical to the Greeks' victory in the war, Odysseus is not famous for his strength, but for his wit. Moreover, he is able to meet and survive the myriad challenges that he is presented with during his protracted journey. The journey, too, is an

important, though not necessarily crucial, part of the story of an epic hero. As Odysseus had his odyssey, so did Aeneas have his, and so on. But Okonkwo is, ultimately, unable to endure, and while he is presented with his fair share of difficulties to overcome, they are not part of any physical journey.

If he is not an epic hero, then perhaps Okonkwo is a *tragic hero*. He constantly seeks and acts to affirm his masculinity, even going so far as to deliver the killing blow to his adopted son, Ikemefuna, because “he was afraid of being thought weak” (61). This masculine *hubris* is indeed a critical factor in destroying Okonkwo and his ambitions: not only does it drive his son away, but it also drives Okonkwo to kill himself, in what constitutes an ultimate refusal to submit to the authority of the white men. But to look at Okonkwo's final and complete descent entirely as the that of a tragic hero is to cheapen Achebe's work as a whole. The factors involved in Okonkwo's fall are significant to broader ideas in the book. While Okonkwo is a victim of his own pride, he is also a victim of the blindness of the white society, which, in its self-aggrandizing quest to civilize and save the heathens, kills not only Okonkwo, but his culture and his values. It seems fitting, then, that Okonkwo, who chooses to kill himself rather than to submit to the judgment of the Westerners, should ultimately conform to neither of their archetypes. In this way, Achebe is able to more completely emphasize his African voice and more powerfully convey the importance of the lifestyle that he describes.