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Things Fall Apart

In *Okonkwo*, we find many of the classical characteristics of the literary hero; great physical strength, a rugged ferocity in battle, and an unquenchable determination to become the anti-thesis of his apathetic father make him not only a hero but an icon to his people. However, Okonkwo is the kind of hero that does not belong outside of myths, the hero to whom the brutal realities of a changing world bear no respect, and a living anachronism fighting the wrong battles. He is a tragic hero.

In the manner of most ancient literary heroes, Okonkwo's early life is full of impressive feats which help build his image in the minds of his people, and which also help spread his fame "like a bush-fire" throughout the territories of Umuofia's neighboring tribes. His epic encounter with Amalinze the Cat is reminiscent of other classical single combat conflicts such as Odysseus' battle against Polyphemus, David's biblical fight against Goliath, or Achilles' duel against Hector, further strengthening Okonkwo's heroic nature. Added to his list of feats, is Okonkwo's participation in Umuofia's wars and his viciousness in battle. Yet, for all this, Okonkwo is also imperfect and flawed. Sadly, but not surprisingly, and like countless other tragic heroes, Okonkwo is the victim of a tragic flaw that is destined to end him. In his case, this flaw is his very fear of becoming anything that resembles his father, Unoka. The fear of being a failure, shunned by the rest of Umuofia, makes Okonkwo a terrible person in all the sense of the word. Heavy-handed with his family and coldly cruel with those he considers to be below him, it is no wonder that he is feared by many for his hotheadedness and his quick temper.

In fact, it is Okonkwo's temper that drives his own son, Nwoye, away from his cold father. It is the fear of being thought weak that compels him to strike down the pleading Ikemefuna. The brutal vindictiveness with which he commands his household is a facade covering the emotions that Okonkwo considers weaknesses: tenderness, love, compassion, and regret. As the events unfold in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's world is eroded by things he cannot change despite his ardent nature. Okonkwo confronts the coming of the white man with his tribal instincts of war, but loses; he confronts the spread of Christianity with his characteristic violence and brutality, but loses; he confronts the death of his gods and the betrayal of his chi with all the rage and passion that he can muster, but also loses. A defeated Okonkwo hangs himself from a tree, his suicide the

most poignant symbol of defeat. As the tragedy becomes complete, one can appreciate how, although flawed, Okonkwo was indeed a hero fighting a losing battle to preserve the glory of his tribe while also trying to immortalize his own name, making him a tragic hero.