

THINGS FALL APART: ON MASCULINITY

From an early point in the novel, it is clear that Okonkwo's idea of his own self-worth and his masculinity are strongly interrelated. As a child, his family did not enjoy the power and status that he came to crave as an adult. His father was, by Okonkwo's description, lazy and lacking in ambition. Because of these characteristics, Okonkwo grew up in relative poverty, and many of the stronger, more ambitious men of the village pitied him. As soon as Okonkwo could work, however, it became clear he was destined for great things. None of his father's vices were prevalent; they were all replaced by a strong work ethic and a duty to both clan and family. Okonkwo sees it as his duty as a man to be strong, to provide for his family, to be a great warrior and have title within the clan, and to instill all of these values in his children to pass on to future generations. In doing all this, Okonkwo pays tribute to the ways of his ancestors and resists change, in all of its forms. Later in the book, however, it becomes apparent that not everyone in the clan shares these views. Many people, including Okonkwo's own son, begin to embrace change, both societal and governmental. This makes Okonkwo's views and resulting actions somewhat controversial throughout the course of the novel.

Unlike his father before him, Okonkwo has no use for small pleasures in life, such as music, dancing, and merrymaking. He desires power and wealth, in all of its forms. Okonkwo wants to build and maintain a strong household, with many wives and even more children. As the head of this large family, Okonkwo sees it as his personal duty to provide them with food and shelter, all of the good things in clan life. A second part of Okonkwo's masculinity is his duty as a warrior. Just as he wants to be strong in providing food and shelter for his family, he wants to be physically strong in defending his village from any outside threats that could change his way of life. Lastly, Okonkwo wants a title within the clan, so that he will be respected by both his family but also by all of the villagers. He wants to be involved in decisions for the whole clan, and be renowned throughout the land.

A second aspect of Okonkwo's masculinity is his wish to pass on his values and respect for tradition to his children, both male and female. He wants the males to have households of their own and provide for their families one day. As for his daughters, he wants to make them good wives who will be dependable and bear many children. In passing on these values, Okonkwo is resisting change. He wants his children to do just as he did, and just as his ancestors did before. Some people in the village, however, do not agree with Okonkwo's philosophy. They see his resistance to new ideas as a weakness, and by staying with past traditions, he is failing to embrace new and better ideas. One of the primary people who disagree with him is his own eldest son.

His son has never been a particularly strong or promising boy, in Okonkwo's eyes. When Okonkwo accidentally shoots someone and is resultantly forced into exile, things begin to change in his clan. White men bring Christian religion to the village, and with it come European laws and culture. Okonkwo thinks this is foolish, but his son does not. He never agreed with Okonkwo's ideas of valor or his forced sense of duty. Thus, when Okonkwo and his family come back to the clan out of exile, he goes to join the new church and embrace the new ideas of tolerance, a legal system, and a broader sense of equality for everyone within the clan. He essentially is breaking free from his father, the

ancestors, and the traditions that the tribe has prescribed to for hundreds if not thousands of years. While some aspects of this new religion and government may be positive, Okonkwo fails to see this. He does not wish to think of his ancestors or of himself as being wrong, and will not accept that any new ideas of government or religion could be better than the old ways. This is only one example of division, but this split in philosophy occurs throughout the clan, essentially breaking it apart.

Okonkwo's ideas of masculinity, family values, and his sense of male duty are very antiquated and traditional. When new ideas are presented to him in the form of European religion and culture, Okonkwo, along with many others, fails to open his mind to the change and refuse to compromise. Thus, there is conflict and a shattering of clan values and relationships that have lasted for generations. Neither group is willing to compromise its ideas or philosophy, and thus by the end of the novel it is evident that the clan has been irreversibly altered.