

ARISTOTLE'S CONCEPT OF TRAGEDY AND TRAGIC HERO IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S "THINGS FALL APART"

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Abstract

Things Fall Apart is an epic; it resembles stories about heroes in many cultures. In such stories, the heroes are extraordinary individuals, whose careers and destinies are not theirs alone, but are bound with the fortunes and destinies of their society. They become heroes by accomplishing great things for themselves and their communities, winning much fame as a result. In an epic story, the hero undergoes many tests, which we can see as rites of passage. This article presents how far this novel can fulfill Aristotle's concept of tragedy as well as tragic hero through its tragic hero, Okonkwo. Okonkwo, the hero of the novel, fits this pattern. In Things Fall Apart, Okonkwo undergoes such tests, including the wrestling match with Amalinze the Cat, his struggle with the negative legacy of his father, and the struggle to succeed on his own.

Keywords: tragedy, tragic flaw, hamartia, pity and fear, tragic hero, poetics, protagonist, catharsis

I. INTRODUCTION

The word tragedy can be applied to a genre of literature. It can mean 'any serious and dignified drama that describes a conflict between the hero (protagonist) and a superior force (destiny, chance, society, god) and reaches a sorrowful conclusion that arouses pity and fear in the audience.' From this genre comes the concept of tragedy, a concept which is based on the possibility that a person may be destroyed precisely because of attempting to be good and is much better than most people, but not perfect. Tragedy implies a conflict between human goodness and reality. Many

feel that if God rewards goodness either on earth or in heaven there can be no tragedy. If in the end each person gets what he or she deserves, tragedy is impossible.

In the century after Sophocles, the philosopher Aristotle analyzed tragedy. Aristotle defines "tragedy" as an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative, through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."

According to Aristotle, the central character of a tragedy must not be so virtuous as such a character, instead of arousing the feeling of pity and fear at his or her downfall, will only give shocked to the readers, or simply caused outraged. Aristotle also claims that a hero should not be so evil that for sake of justice we desire his or her misfortune. Instead, the ideal hero is someone "who is neither outstanding in virtue and righteousness; nor is it through badness or villainy of his own that he falls into misfortune, but rather through some flaw [hamartia]." The character also should be famous or prosperous.

II. DISCUSSION

From Aristotle's definition of tragedy quoted above, we know that a tragedy is a work that provides catharsis by the use of a tragic hero who is within a tragic setting or environment. Achebe reveals *Things Fall Apart* as a tragedy through his tragic hero, Okonkwo, and by the pity and fear aroused in the reader.

Okonkwo is a tragic hero in every scene of the definition. Aristotle defines a tragedy as a work that is meant to provide catharsis, or "arouse pity and fear in the audience so that we may be purged, or cleansed, of ... unsettling emotion". This is done with "serious, important events, in which the main character comes to an unhappy end". This character's downfall results from "a tragic flaw, a character's weakness, or events beyond the character's control". To conclude Aristotle's definition of tragedy, it states that the tragic hero usually "gain some self-knowledge or wisdom in spite of defeat".

Achebe in his *Things Fall Apart* tells the readers that as a tragic hero, Okonkwo fulfils the definition of tragedy given by Aristotle. It is known that a tragic hero should

be of noble blood, famous or prosperous. In this story, the heroes are extraordinary individuals, whose careers and destinies are not their alone, but are bound with the fortunes and destinies of their society. They become heroes by accomplishing great things for themselves and their communities, winning much fame as a result.

Okonkwo fits this pattern. The first paragraph of *Things Fall Apart* is notable in this respect, for it describes Okonkwo as follows:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievement. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old man agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their own town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights. (Achebe, 1958: 3)

At the beginning of the novel, Okonkwo's father Unoka dies when Okonkwo is still very young, and he is a failure. He dies in debt and humiliation. Shame for Unoka drives Okonkwo to work tirelessly. The memory of his father gives Okonkwo a terrible fear of failure. The very first thing he does is to fight Amalinze the Cat in a wrestling championship. Having beaten Amalinze, Okonkwo's fame has been grown like a bush-fire in harmattan. His winning upon Amalinze gives honor to his clan.

When Okonkwo is young, he courageously goes into battles and stalks his victim, eventually killing him to obtain his first human head. For his bravery and achievement, Okonkwo has already gained two titles. He also has fought bravely in two inter-tribal wars.

It is not the only thing that Okonkwo has done. He keeps trying to get the honorable position in his clan. Though young, Okonkwo is already a great man. With a father like Unoka, Okonkwo does not have the start in life which many young men have. He neither inherits a barn nor a title, nor even a young wife. But in spite of these disadvantages, he has begun even in his father's lifetime to lay the foundation of a prosperous future. He has to start out as a sharecropper for a rich man named

Nwakibie. However, Okonkwo realizes that he cannot have a prosperous life if he still works with Nwakibie so that he decides to come to Nwakibie for help. He asks Nwakibie for yams. And to his surprise, Nwakibie gives Okonkwo eight hundreds seed-yams. But, the first year of Okonkwo's plant is the worst planting year in Umuofia's living memory. Okonkwo, with superhuman determination, survives. As a result, he has owned two barns full of yams. He also has three wives.

As it is said that "Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings." (Achebe, 1958: 6)

The lines quoted above show that Okonkwo is still young but he has won a great fame in spite of his poor family background. He rises to a high position by dint of hard work and sincerity of earnest efforts. He becomes one of the greatest men of his clan at an early stage of life. Okonkwo is still a boy but he has attained what any other boy of his age cannot. He is a man of iron will and he makes his fortune by the sweat of his brow. He is older than his age. In those days, a man's position is adjudged in the society by his achievements and not by years of age. At an early stage he enjoys the status with the aged people who can achieve high position only during their old age. Even the elders holding high ranks and position in Ibo society holds him in high esteem. They invite him on the eve of the marriages of their sons and daughters. He attends important meetings of the rulers of the village. He eats and drinks with the great men of his native land. It is due to his worth, fame and position among the clansmen that he is entrusted with the liability of looking after Ikemefuna whom he has brought from the neighboring village to avoid war and bloodshed. This absolutely fulfills the definition of tragedy given by Aristotle.

Another characteristic of a tragedy is the presence of a tragic flaw or hamartia of the hero. One of Okonkwo's tragic flaws is his carelessness. It happens when he, due to his carelessness, accidentally kills a boy from his clan. It happens when Okonkwo comes to Ezeudu's funeral. During the ceremony, Okonkwo's gun explodes suddenly. A piece of iron pierces the heart of one of Ezeudu's sons. Even though the death is accidental, the act is abomination to the Igbo. See the following quotation:

The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years. (Achebe, 1958: 88)

It is clear that even though Okonkwo accidentally kills the boy, the act is still forbidden in their clan. It is against the earth goddess and Okonkwo should be punished. As a punishment, Okonkwo is to be exiled for seven years, and the next morning some men come and destroy Okonkwo's house. They also kill his animals and set fire to the building. This accidentally event becomes the starting point of Okonkwo's next tragic flaw.

During his exaltation, there are a lot of changes taking place in some of the villages due to the coming of white men and their Christianity. Two years into exile, Okonkwo is visited by Obierika, who brings news of the arrival of white men and their destruction of a place called Abame. The Abame people have killed the first white man who arrives there on a bicycle (iron horse) after their oracle tells them that "the stranger would break their clan and spread destruction among them." Another two years go by, and Obierika arrives for a second visit. He informs Okonkwo that the presence of the white men has reached into Mbanta and Umuofia. Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, has joined the white men. Nwoye has been sighted in Umuofia where the whites have built churches and established missions from where to spread their gospel.

The end of Okonkwo's seven years of exile draws near. The white men and their Christianity foothold have grown stronger. The Mbanta community adjusts to the new situation. Okonkwo is contemptuous of his mother's people's accommodating response to the ever-growing strength of the new Christian community. In Umuofia, Okonkwo discovers that many things have changed. Many men of title have converted and joined the Christians. The white men have not only sought converts and built churches; they also have set up a government and a court system. It is the system that does not respect their traditions or social order. Okonkwo is sad and perplexed by

these changes. He does not understand why his people have lost the power to fight. Obierika tells him that it is too late to fight the way he envisions. Umuofia is greatly changed from the one he knows seven years earlier. Contrary to his expectations the men of Umuofia have not dealt boldly with the white men and their religion. He is in an increasingly small minority with his views. Most of the others do not agree completely with the white men's ways, but many are willing to compromise.

Later when Umuofia is at a meeting, the District Commissioner's messengers arrive to order the meeting dispersed. The angry Okonkwo confronts them, draws his sword and beheads their leader. The meeting is disrupted. Okonkwo realizes that Umuofia will not fight. He cleans his bloody sword in the sand and silently goes away. He is not seen alive again. In a final act of despair, Okonkwo commits suicide by hanging himself from a tree behind his house.

This situation clearly shows Okonkwo's tragic flaw due to his inability to adapt to the changes of his culture, stubbornly seeking to stick to the old ways he once knows. Okonkwo has taken everything about the clan in a personal way and has acted accordingly. He has clung to a tiny desperate hope that the clan shall redeem itself by following his example to act like brave warriors. But that small hope is disappointed. In the end he loses all faith in the world around him and does not care to live in it any more. When the District Commissioner comes with a posse of men to arrest Okonkwo, Obierika says to him:

"That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog ..."
(Achebe, 1958: 147)

It is clear that as a great man in Umuofia, Okonkwo cannot face the reality. Even to escape from this reality, Okonkwo does something against the earth goddess. This quotation shows how Okonkwo realizes that he could not adapt or survive in his culture. With that in his mind, he feels that he cannot live any longer. Thus, Okonkwo hangs himself. The readers likely feel pity when Achebe tells the readers of this through the eyes and mouth of Obierika.

Achebe arouses pity, one of the things that according to Aristotle must be in tragedy, in his readers through the events he places in *Things Fall Apart*. In the very

beginning of chapter four, an old man who bears no ill will towards Okonkwo, and respects him for his good fortune is struck by the brusqueness Okonkwo has when dealing with less successful men. In the previous week, an unsuccessful man has contradicted him at a kindred meeting held to discuss important matters. Without looking at whoever the man is, Okonkwo calls out to him: “This meeting is for men” because the man has no titles, revealing Okonkwo’s harsh behavior. Okonkwo knows well how to kill a man’s spirit, which is, perhaps, foreshadowing of how he kills Ikemefuna. This is another deeply pitying event, when he kills Ikemefuna because of his much prideful fear of looking weak. It also arouses fear to the readers when they come to the fact that through Okonkwo’s ears, the elders of Umuofia have declared that Ikemefuna must die. Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man in Umuofia forewarns Okonkwo “not bear a hand in his death”. This statement arouses fear in the reader, who wonders how, and if Ikemefuna will die, and whether or not Okonkwo will be the one to kill him. Ikemefuna is the ill-fated lad entrusted to Okonkwo’s care by the Umuofia council of elders. Ikemefuna is one of two young people from neighboring Mbaino, handed over by his people in compensation for the death of a daughter of Umuofia. Ikemefuna comes to live as a member of Okonkwo’s household. His stay in Okonkwo’s home is supposed to be a temporary arrangement – until the clan decides what is to be done with him – but he ends up living as a member of the family for three years. He becomes wholly absorbed into his new family. In that time he becomes a mentor and is like an elder brother to Nwoye, Okonkwo’s first son who, in his father’s disappointed view is taking on traits of his indolent grandfather. Under Ikemefuna’s influence, however, Nwoye blossoms. Ikemefuna makes Nwoye feel grown-up to his father’s secret pleasure. Okonkwo is inwardly pleased at his son’s development, and he knows it is due to Ikemefuna. After three years, Ikemefuna has begun to call Okonkwo ‘father’, but the day comes when the oracle pronounces on the boy’s fate. Ikemefuna is to be sacrificed to Agbala. On the appointed day, some men of Umuofia including Okonkwo take the boy into the forest on a pretext of taking him home to his people. Someone else inflicts the first blow, but when the boy cries and runs to his ‘father’ for help, Okonkwo inflicts the fatal cut with his machete. Okonkwo is afraid to be thought weak by his fellows if he shows compassion to the boy who

knows him as a father and so he kills the boy. It can be seen in the following quotation:

As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his matchet, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, 'My father, the have killed me!' as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak. (Achebe, 1958: 43)

It can be seen clearly from the quotation above that the act of killing Ikemefuna arouses pity and fear in the readers. It strikes our feeling of pity and fear towards Okonkwo and Ikemefuna in which Okonkwo, afraid of being thought weak, participates in killing Ikemefuna who has regarded him as his father. While on the other hand, Okonkwo also has a hidden feeling of love towards Ikemefuna. He loves Ikemefuna for he has made Nwoye become more confident and hard-working young man.

Next, in the middle of chapter seventeen, Okonkwo learns that his son, Nwoye, is attracted to Christianity. Although Nwoye has been attracted to the new faith from the very first day, he keeps it secret. He dares not to go too near the missionaries for fear of his father. But unfortunately, Okonkwo's cousin, Amikwu, is passing by the church on his way from the neighboring village, when he sees Nwoye among the Christians. He is greatly surprised, and when he gets home, he goes straight to Okonkwo's hut and tells him what he has seen. It is late afternoon before Nwoye returns. He goes into the *obi* and salutes his father, but he does not answer. Nwoye turns round to walk into the inner compound when his father, suddenly overcomes with furry, springs to his feet and grip him by the neck. The following quotation shows how Okonkwo's action towards Nwoye arouses fear in the reader:

'Where have you been?' he stammered.
Nwoye struggled to free himself from the choking grip.
'Answer me,' roared Okonkwo, 'beforei kill you!' He seized a heavy stick that lay on the dwarf wall and hit him two or three savage blows.
'Answer me!' he roared again. Nwoye stood looking at him and did not say a word. The women were screaming outside, afraid to go in. (Achebe, 1958: 107)

Because of this incident, Nwoye walks away and never returns. While Okonkwo, finding out that Nwoye has followed the Christianity, disowns him.

The last thing that arouses fear is when Agbala wishes to see Ezinma, Okonkwo's daughter with his second wife Ekwefi, the priestess Chielo comes and calls for her. Fear is then provoked in the reader as to if Ezinma will ever be seen again, alive! Ekwefi and Okonkwo go on an adventure to protect Ezinma from almost certain death. Luckily, Chielo quenches all fears when she brings Ezinma back, alive and well.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Achebe has thoroughly revealed *Things Fall Apart* as a tragedy through his tragic hero, Okonkwo, and by the pity and fear aroused in the reader; therefore, Achebe successfully and accurately fulfills Aristotle's concept of tragedy and tragic hero in his famous work entitled *Poetics*.

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