

Chinua Achebe's 1958 masterpiece, 'Things Fall Apart', describes a once thriving Nigerian village about to be consumed by colonialism. The village leader, Okonkwo, is the epitome of the tragic hero, unwittingly bringing about destruction.

Okonkwo as Tragic Hero

What happens when everything is going bad? Your children aren't turning out like you expected. Your spouse is driving you crazy, and the community you love and lead is falling apart. **Okonkwo**, the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's 1958 masterpiece, *Things Fall Apart*, faces the exact same predicament. Okonkwo is the leader and strong man of the **Igbo**, a Nigerian ethnic community, who live in the village of **Umuofia**. Okonkwo becomes the epitome of the **tragic hero**, one whose incredible talents drive him to the heights of success only to bring about his ruin.

Okonkwo the Haunted Son

Okonkwo is a man's man; powerful, dominating, and fearsome. However, it's all an act, a mask he's created to hide the fact that he's running from the memory of his father, Unoka. Unoka was everything a man in Okonkwo's culture is not supposed to be. He was lazy, weak, and an absentee father and husband; he owed debts and never worked to

husband; he owed debts and never worked to repay them. He was artistic, weeping over music and poetry. He was a village laughingstock and not a man at all in Okonkwo's mind.

In trying to prove to the world, and to himself, that he is nothing like his weak, slovenly, laughable father, Okonkwo becomes a bully and a hothead. His desperation to escape the shame of his father, in fact, binds him even more tightly to him, coloring everything Okonkwo does, thinks, and feels.

He wants nothing more than to be a true man, which to Okonkwo means being a strong man, and in that desperation, everything else falls away: love, compassion, patience, gentleness, wisdom. Okonkwo spends his entire life destructively wrestling with ghosts and boxing with shadows. In the process, like a true tragic hero, his greatest strength, his masculine power, also becomes his greatest weakness, the **hamartia**, or fatal flaw, that leads to his destruction.

Okonkwo and His Children

Okonkwo's desperation not to be like his father bleeds into his relationship with his own family, especially his children. He becomes a tyrant at home. This is especially

becomes a tyrant at home. This is especially true of his treatment of his twelve-year-old son, Nwoye, in whom Okonkwo perceives signs of his father's weakness and idleness. He frequently beats and berates the boy.

Things in Okonkwo's home start to improve for a time but Ikemefuna, a sixteen-year-old boy given to the village of Umuofia, arrives as a peace offering from a neighboring village. Okonkwo takes the boy into his home and quickly grows to love him. Okonkwo even thinks he sees Nwoye becoming more manly under Ikemefuna's influence.

But this hopeful time does not last. Okonkwo's demons linger. He violates the Week of Peace, disrespecting the gods by beating his young wife. His community is shocked by this sacrilege. It would be like showing up drunk to a house of worship and peeing on the altar.

Things then go from bad to worse. Okonkwo learns that an **Oracle**, a messenger of the gods, has determined that Ikemefuna must be killed. A village elder, Ezeuda, warns Okonkwo that he must not take part in Ikemefuna's sacrifice because the boy considers Okonkwo to be a father figure, and to take part in his death would offend the gods.

Okonkwo is devastated at the thought of losing the beloved boy, and if we've learned anything about Okonkwo, it's that any gentle emotion only brings out his worst. When Ikemefuna runs to Okonkwo for help, Okonkwo deals the death blow. He cannot risk looking weak or effeminate before the village. He instinctively reacts, and in the process offends the gods once more.

What happens next surely rings of divine vengeance. Ezeuda dies and the village gathers for his funeral. There, Okonkwo's gun inexplicably explodes, killing Ezeuda's sixteen-year-old son. Killing a clansman, even by accident, is profoundly insulting to the earth goddess. So the village sends Okonkwo and his family into exile for seven years, a way of appeasing the goddess and cleansing the village of Okonkwo's sins.