

Broken Virtues

Every society has virtues. Some of these virtues are considered more important than others. In *Things Fall Apart*, by Chinua Achebe, the Ibo communities have their own sets of virtues. Okonkwo, the protagonist, clearly exhibits some of these virtues. Yet Okonkwo's virtues were not ultimately beneficial to him. He twists them out of fear of being considered weak. While Okonkwo's virtues of traditional manliness, persistence, and courage sometimes earn him the respect of his peers, they lead to his downfall in the end.

Okonkwo's traditional masculinity causes problems throughout the novel. His hyper-masculinity leads him to hate all things feminine, which is not a healthy way to live. He suppresses many aspects of not only himself, but others too. This causes Okonkwo to act without compassion. When he found the banana trees with missing leaves, he has a tantrum. He considers work to be manly, and when he cannot work (which makes him *unmanly*) he becomes restless. He takes this restlessness out on poor Ekwefi, his second wife. When Okonkwo sees the tree, he, "... gave [Ekwefi] a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping" (38). Only someone without compassion would ever purposely leave anyone, especially a child, in tears, all for manliness. This lack of compassion is likely a factor in Okonkwo's hatred of the missionaries. Had he shown more compassion towards others and tried to understand other people more, he may hate the Christians less. Had Okonkwo harbored less hate toward the Christians, his downfall may not have occurred. His hatred toward the Christians causes him to kill the messenger, which likely causes his death (and downfall). Okonkwo's excessive manliness also causes him to be an overall terrible father. Not only did he cause his own daughter to cry, but he also refuses to show any affection towards his children. Okonkwo's

emotions live inside, “unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness...” (28). This makes him a terrible father, which is a part of what leads to Okonkwo’s downfall. Okonkwo being such an awful father is a huge reason for Nwoye leaving. Had Okonkwo been a better, more accepting and loving father, Nwoye would not have left. Instead of being a loving father, Okonkwo says, “Answer me... before I kill you!” upon realizing that Nwoye is a convert, before kicking him out. If Okonkwo had been more feminine, his love for his own son would have eventually outgrown his hatred towards the Christians. This hatred toward the Christians, which is fueled by his hyper-masculinity, is what causes Okonkwo to kill the messenger, then himself.

In addition to his manliness, Okonkwo’s persistence also leads to his downfall. This persistence becomes stubbornness as the novel goes on. Okonkwo is stubborn early in the novel. This stubbornness is evident when he refuses to admit to Obierika that killing Ikemefuna was a bad idea, insisting that the “Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger” (67). Had Okonkwo learned to admit his mistakes, he may not have made more mistakes later. This stubborn refusal to accept the Christians is what leads to Okonkwo’s downfall. Had he been more accepting, Okonkwo may not have killed the messenger. And had that not happened, Okonkwo would not have killed himself. Okonkwo is described as a hardworking, persistent man from the first chapter, and throughout the novel it becomes clear that this is true. In fact, if Okonkwo learned to let things go, he may have let go of his hatred towards the Christians. His stubbornness to not let things go was not the only way persistence leads to Okonkwo’s downfall. His persistence to be considered powerful in the minds of others also leads to his downfall. In most cases, working hard to be successful is a good thing to be admired. However, Okonkwo’s

persistence at the end of the novel begins to resemble an obsession, and most obsessions, especially ones for power, lead to people like Voldemort. Even when Okonkwo was exiled to Mbanta, "... he had begun to plan for his return [to Umuofia]" (171). Who plans so early? Some may say that foresight like that is good, but how healthy is it to be planning something *seven years* from then? Yet Okonkwo's yearning for success in the town is not even the peak of his obsession for power. This obsession (sorry, *persistence*) for power was also in his attitude towards the Christians. Okonkwo will not let anyone have more power than he did. Once the Christians gain some influence, his hatred for them begins. Had Okonkwo just let the Christians have some power, his downfall may not have occurred the way it did. Instead, he insisted the Ibo people, "... kill the missionary or drive away the Christians..." (192). Okonkwo's persistence to drive away the missionaries looks eerily like an obsession to have complete power. Okonkwo's persistence, which looks like both obsession and stubbornness, leads to his downfall because that causes him to kill the messenger, which leads to his suicide.

While Okonkwo's traditional manliness and persistence lead to his downfall, his bravery leads to it most directly. For Okonkwo, courage and recklessness go hand in hand. Okonkwo brings a gun to Ezeudu's funeral despite knowing that he is unable to properly aim a gun. The result of this is "a cry of agony and shout of horror... All was silent. In the center of the crowd a boy lay in a pool of blood. It was [Ezeudu]'s sixteen-year-old son... Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart" (124). The result of this reckless behavior is that Okonkwo murdered a young boy. That leads to a chain of events where Okonkwo and his family are not respected by the Umuofians. After the exile, Okonkwo, "had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan" (171).

Okonkwo now has little respect from his peers. Since Umuofia lost respect for Okonkwo, when Okonkwo kills the messenger no one rallies against the white people. Had he never lost respect in the eyes of his peers, they may have attacked the messenger as well. Because of being exiled and this loss of respect, even Okonkwo admits that he, “had lost the chance to lead his warlike clan against the new religion...” (171). If Okonkwo had not recklessly brought a gun to the funeral, the chain of events that cause the clan to not fight with him probably would not have occurred. Had the clan fought with Okonkwo, there would have been a war, not a suicide. Okonkwo’s recklessness also leads to his downfall when he kills the messenger. When Okonkwo recklessly kills the messenger, there is no turning back. That is the event that most directly leads to his downfall. No matter what came before that moment, had Okonkwo not killed the messenger, his downfall would have been different. Since Okonkwo did kill the messenger, though, his downfall was guaranteed. Once he kills the messenger, his death or imprisonment is inevitable. Some may say that Okonkwo was justified in killing the messenger, yet the truth remains that it directly leads to his death. Okonkwo’s bravery, which sometimes shows itself as recklessness, leads directly to Okonkwo’s downfall, his suicide.

Okonkwo has many virtues, such as traditional manliness, persistence, and bravery. Okonkwo twists and perverts these virtues, which lead to his downfall. Had Okonkwo not distorted these virtues due to his fear of weakness, they may have assisted him. Instead, Okonkwo lives his life in fear and distorts his positive qualities. This fear and his broken virtues lead to Okonkwo's downfall. Virtues are only good when one knows it has gone too far.

