

# “To Conquer and Subdue”

Okonkwo’s Masculinity in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*

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## Table of contents

Introduction . . . . .	1
Okonkwo's masculine traits . . . . .	2
Okonkwo and his clan . . . . .	7
The origins of Okonkwo's extremism . . . . .	10
Consequences and Okonkwo's downfall . . . . .	11
Conclusion . . . . .	14
Works cited . . . . .	16

## Introduction

Throughout history, human cultures have held notions of what it means to be a man, and what, by contrast, it means to be feminine. These notions may vary from culture to culture and change over time, but they are often an integral part of the culture, sometimes upheld almost manically. Chinua Achebe's 1958 debut novel *Things Fall Apart* presents the clan of Umuofia, a traditional, pre-colonial Igbo society in West Africa, where the established gender roles dominate and govern practically every aspect of life—from household chores and duties to what crops are cultivated by whom. Okonkwo, the novel's protagonist, seems to embody manliness in every possible way. While mainly a product of the virtues of the society he belongs to, he seems to have developed a fear of weakness that results in an exaggerated view on manliness—and an urge to exercise this manliness. The fear appears to stem from his resentment of his father, whose laziness caused Okonkwo much embarrassment and suffering in his youth. Ultimately, Okonkwo's hostile stances precipitate his own downfall, and the breakup of his family.

The aim of this essay is to examine the masculinity of the protagonist, and how it brings about his undoing, despite the fact that he lives in a conservative society where masculinity is revered. This examination will be carried out in four main steps. Firstly, Okonkwo's masculine attributes will be recounted and analyzed. Secondly, his masculinity will be compared to that of the rest of the clan. Thirdly, the origins of his excessively manly behavior and values will be identified, and finally, the consequences thereof will be discussed.

The decision to focus on the protagonist was not obvious at first, but as I delved into the topic of masculinity while rereading the novel, it seemed to constantly connect to Okonkwo and his issues. Although he is a staunch icon of manliness, his character is complex and not as self-evident as I first thought. His masculinity is quite central to the plot, and well worth looking into.

In the novel, Achebe uses the now somewhat archaic spelling "Ibo" when referring to the Igbo people and language. The spelling "Igbo" is more common today (and more accurately reflects the pronunciation of the word) and is the one I will employ in this essay.

## Okonkwo's masculine traits

The image of Okonkwo as *the* male is built throughout the novel, as the character is developed and his traits revealed through actions and dialogue. Very few of his traits are unrelated to his masculinity. Some of his masculine attributes are very straightforward, while others are less obvious. In *Masculine, Feminine or Human?: An Overview of the Sociology of the Gender Roles*, Janet Saltzman Chafetz lists seven categories of stereotypical differences between the genders. In the following sections, Okonkwo's masculine traits will be recounted, using the relevant male traits listed by Chafetz as a basis for discussion.

The single most stereotypically masculine quality is probably that of bodily strength and vigor. Okonkwo's brute strength is established early on and regularly alluded to in the course of the novel, and is an essential part of his masculine identity. From the very first page, it is clear that he is a man of physical power: a famous wrestler of great stature—later on, in fact, pronounced “the greatest wrestler and warrior alive” (82)—whose muscles, when fighting, “stood out on [his] arms . . . and one almost heard them stretching to the breaking point.” His wrestling skills, which made him “well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond” (3), also indicate athleticism, which adds to his masculine character, according to the male stereotype as presented by Chafetz (38).

The lack of instances in the novel of Okonkwo being concerned about his appearance or aging is in accordance with Chafetz' list, which suggests that doing so is feminine (38). Moreover, there are instances of women tending to their looks, which confirms the contrast; for example, in preparing for the New Yam Festival, the women “[paint] themselves with cam wood and [draw] beautiful black patterns on their stomachs and on their backs” (27). On another occasion, Okonkwo's youngest wife, Ojiugo, forgets to make him his afternoon meal. When he learns that she has gone “to plait her hair at her friend's house . . . Okonkwo [bites] his lips as anger well[s] up within him” (21). Although his anger is probably mostly due to Ojiugo's failure to attend her cooking duties, it is fuelled when he finds out the reason for her absence. This could indicate a lack of understanding for her vanity, further proving Okonkwo's lack of concern with appearance.

Bravery is a masculine trait (Chafetz 38), and Okonkwo is a brave man. He has exhibited “incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars” (6), and his prowess is “universally acknowledged” (27). His reputation of being brave seems to rest largely on his stoic indifference to the atrocities of war and death:

. . . [Okonkwo] was not afraid of war. He was a man of action, a man of war. Unlike his father he could stand the look of blood. In Umuofia’s latest war he was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head; and he was not an old man yet. On great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank his palm-wine from his first human head. (7–8)

The merit in being brave in Umuofia can be seen in the very name of the clan; in full, it is known as “*Umuofia obodo dike*,” meaning “the land of the brave” (84).

Being a breadwinner and providing for one’s family is another masculine quality (Chafetz 38). A true breadwinner in every way, Okonkwo is described as a “wealthy farmer [with] two barns full of yams, [who has] just married his third wife” (6). He manages to keep an abundance of harvested crops and sacrifice generously to the gods, while feeding three wives and an increasing number of sons and daughters—at the beginning of the novel eight children (10). The fact that what he grows is yams is a masculine factor in itself, since according to the convictions of his people, yams stand “for manliness, and he who [can] feed his family on yams from one harvest to another is a very great man indeed” (23). Furthermore, unlike many other young men, when starting out, he “neither inherited a barn nor a title, nor even a young wife”. His father’s incompetence forced him to “lay the foundations of a prosperous future” all by himself, a “slow and painful” process (13). Okonkwo is, thus, committed to hard work, “work[ing] daily on his farms from cock-crow until the chickens [go] to roost” (10), and in doing so, he provides for his family—as well as his ancestors, through sacrifice. In fact, his breadwinning inclination is so strong that he is unable to enjoy feasts that keep him idle, even when it is common practice not to work; he feels “uncomfortable sitting around for days waiting for a feast or getting over it. He would be very much happier working on his farm” (27).

Chafetz lists a category of “emotional” traits typical for the masculine gender, in which men are described as “unemotional, stoic” individuals who “don’t cry” (38).

Okonkwo possesses a consistent stoicism that hampers emotional outlets. He “never show[s] any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection [is] a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating [is] strength” (20). He certainly does not cry, and when his eldest son Nwoye, whose masculinity he solicitously cultivates, is provoked to tears, Okonkwo “beat[s] him heavily” (40) to suppress what he sees as weak and effeminate behavior.

The stereotypical male traits according to Chafetz include the status of “contributor to society” (38), which accurately describes Okonkwo’s active role in his clan and village. Besides contributing to the society by being a prosperous farmer and a warrior who has risked his life for the clan, and would do so again, Okonkwo is “one of the lords of the clan” (19). He is involved in decision-making, and is chosen to be the “proud and imperious emissary of war” (9) when a war might break out between Umuofia and the enemy clan of Mbaino. He is also active in communal ceremonies: he is one of the terrifying *egwugwu*, an incarnation of ancestral spirits, which is clearly an honorable and important task.

Okonkwo’s dogmatic nature, a masculine trait (Chafetz 38), is easy to detect. Apart from his obvious compliance with the dogmas of masculinity, he is also a zealous adherent of the hierarchies, institutes and creed of his clan. For example, when arguing with his friend Obierika, he is quite troubled when he suspects that his friend is challenging the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves: “You sound as if you question the authority and the decision of the Oracle” (46). This adherence is especially visible in the latter part of the novel, when the Christian missionaries arrive and try to change the customs of Umuofia. Okonkwo is saddened and enraged by the new religion and government, but most of all by how his own clansmen abandon their old ways: “What is it that has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight? . . . We must fight these men and drive them from the land” (124).

Leadership and domination are other masculine stereotypes (Chafetz 38) that apply to Okonkwo. He has a fiercely dominant disposition, and a need to subjugate. Much like the yam he grows, a symbol of masculinity, is “the king of crops, . . . a very exacting king” (24), Okonkwo is the king of his household, and an exacting, demanding king. He expects nothing less than complete, unquestioned obedience from his three wives, and does not hesitate to take to verbal or physical abuse upon receiving anything that he

interprets as defiance—which might be only a harmless question. Such is the case when Okonkwo is ordered by the elders of the clan to take in the boy Ikemefuna. Ikemefuna arrives in Umuofia, together with a girl, as compensation for a crime committed by an enemy clan, in order to avoid war:

. . . [The elders] decided that the girl should go to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered wife. As for the boy, he belonged to the clan as a whole, and there was no hurry to decide his fate. Okonkwo was, therefore, asked on behalf of the clan to look after him in the interim.

And so for three years Ikemefuna lived in Okonkwo's household. (9)

Following the elders' decision, as Okonkwo hands the boy over to his first wife, the only explanation he offers is that the boy "belongs to the clan," and tells his wife to "look after him." When his wife inquires about the length of the boy's stay—in no way an unreasonable query—Okonkwo is enraged, and roars: "Do what you are told, woman" (10). There is no indication that he is upset before the question is asked; his outburst is simply a reaction to what he sees as a provocative challenging of his authority.

On the other hand, there are also instances of Okonkwo making up excuses just to get an outlet for his anger. One such occasion is during the preparations for the New Yam Festival. Okonkwo has been "walking about aimlessly in his compound in suppressed anger," when he finds an outlet to his anger in a banana tree that he claims has been killed, demanding to know who did it. The tree is in fact not dead at all; his second wife, Ekwefi, has "merely cut a few leaves off to wrap some food." She tells Okonkwo this, but he dismisses her explanation, and in a fit over her disobedience, gives her a "sound beating" that leaves her and her child in tears (27). Following the beating, Ekwefi, in response to Okonkwo's decision to go hunting, mutters about "guns that never [shoot]," prompting him to fetch his gun and fire a shot at her, which he luckily misses (28). Any defiance is interpreted by Okonkwo as a questioning of his indisputable authority, and met with violence, causing his wives and children to live "in perpetual fear of his fiery temper" (9).

Another example of Okonkwo's obstinate domination is his reaction to Ojiugo's forgetfulness as she fails to return home in time to do her duty of preparing his afternoon meal:

. . . [W]hen she returned he beat her very heavily. In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. His first two wives ran out in a great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess. (21)

Within hours of the abuse, the priest of the earth goddess pays Okonkwo a visit; it is “unheard of to beat somebody during the sacred week,” and when Okonkwo offers him kola nut, the priest refuses to “eat in the house of a man who has no respect for [their] gods and ancestors” (21). During the Week of Peace, “a man [should] not say a harsh word to his neighbor,” and in assaulting his wife, Okonkwo has “committed a great evil . . . [that] can ruin the whole clan” (22). Okonkwo is generally not a religiously irreverent person; he is described as worshipping and god-fearing (9–10). Yet his adherence to masculine dominance is so tenacious that it drives him to commit sacrilege, fully aware that he will have to suffer the consequences. In Okonkwo’s opinion, “[n]o matter how prosperous a man [is], if he [is] unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he [is] not really a man” (37).

Okonkwo’s aggressiveness (which suggests manliness according to Chafetz [39]), closely related to his strength and dominative personality, is quite prominent and has been hinted at in previous sections. He is not much of a talker, and “pounce[s] on people quite often” (3), rather than discussing the matter of disagreement. Because he is prone and intent to show his strength, it is closely linked to his aggressive tendencies. As previously mentioned, anger is the only emotion he considers worth displaying; aggressiveness being the inevitable result, he treats his family, accordingly, “with a heavy hand” (9). His vigor and fierceness thus contribute to the general image of Okonkwo as a personification of aggressive manliness.

Other personal masculine traits include ambition and success orientation (Chafetz 39), which Okonkwo clearly has, considering his rise “from great poverty and misfortune” (19), which he had to achieve without any help from his father; decisiveness (Chafetz 39), which can be seen in his determination to help himself; and competitiveness (*ibid*), which can be attributed Okonkwo considering his past as a great wrestler.

As for Okonkwo's pride, yet another masculine trait (Chafetz 39), it is explicitly mentioned in the novel. His father Unoka, in his last days, tells him that he has "a manly and proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride" (18). Yet his pride proves an undesirable quality, as will be discussed further ahead.

While there are barely any direct mentions of Okonkwo's sex life in the novel, his general aggressiveness and gender-based domination can be assumed to concern his sexuality as well, and sexual aggressiveness is listed by Chafetz as a masculine trait (38). Further evidence is his unwillingness to ever display affection; there is no indication that sexual interaction should be an exception. His brutish view on the opposite gender is made explicit in a scene where the beat of the wrestling drums fills him with passion: "He trembled with the desire to conquer and subdue. It was like the desire for a woman" (30).

### Okonkwo and his clan

Although manliness indubitably is a virtue in the clan, Okonkwo is more misogynistic and obsessively manly than his average clansman and as the clan as a whole. Umuofia is a warring clan, feared by its neighbors—and yet "it never [goes] to war unless its case [is] clear and just" (9), completely unlike Okonkwo, whose unrestrained aggressiveness does not allow for discussion.

In the article "Culture in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*," Diana Akers Rhoads mentions that the novel "presents the best men as combining the masculine and feminine. Okonkwo is defective in his rejection of the feminine, but the tribal norms combine the masculine and feminine" (71). The only time a crack can be glimpsed in his masculinity is when he spends time with his daughter Ezinma, to whom he has taken a special liking. Although "his fondness [for Ezinma] only show[s] on rare occasions" (32), the fact that it shows at all means that his stoicism is not absolute. Aji and Ellsworth argue that "[i]f Ezinma is a source of comfort for Okonkwo throughout his troubled life, it is because she subdues his manhood, balancing the masculine and the feminine attributes to make him a full person" (par. 11). Ezinma does provide a few small glimpses of what a less compulsively masculine, more harmonious Okonkwo could have been like.

Obierika, Okonkwo's closest friend, is an example of a more balanced male character, who does not share the protagonist's exaggerated masculinity. While Okonkwo is "not a man of thought but of action" (48), Obierika is described as "a man who [thinks] about things" (87). The contrast could not be clearer; Okonkwo's rash aggressiveness is the very opposite of his friend's level-headedness. Despite his lack of aggressiveness—a crucial part of Okonkwo's masculinity—Obierika is a successful man (or Okonkwo would not socialize with him, as he has "no patience with unsuccessful men" [3]), which shows the irrationality in Okonkwo's rejection of everything but what he perceives as masculine in himself.

Okonkwo's extreme obsession with appearing manly is deeply rooted, and he refuses to yield to ideas that go against his beliefs. When he finds himself fond of Ikemefuna, the boy who, by decision of the clan elders, comes to live in Okonkwo's household, it is an inward fondness, not to be outwardly shown, because of his emotional restraints. So he treats Ikemefuna like he treats everyone else—using violence. The boy lives in Okonkwo's household for three years, and becomes a part of his family. Then, one day, an oracle decrees that he be killed. The message is brought to Okonkwo by Ezeudu, who is a greatly respected man of old age and a former warrior. Ikemefuna is to be taken out of Umuofia and killed, but Ezeudu urges Okonkwo not to participate in the killing, arguing: "That boy calls you father. Do not bear hand in his death" (40). Nevertheless, the next day, Okonkwo not only accompanies the group of men that are taking Ikemefuna away to kill him, but also, in desperation, deals him the killing blow:

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, they 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. (43)

As Ernest A. Champion observes in his article "The Story of a Man and His People," Ezeudu's suggestion "present[s] to Okonkwo a dilemma which he is incapable of rationalizing" (274). His instinct to act masculine and prove himself powerful is so deeply rooted that he does not hesitate to kill a family member when confronted with the risk of "being thought weak"—even after a respected villager, a "great and fearless

warrior in his time” (40), urges him not to participate, indicating that no allegations of weakness are likely. This is confirmed by Okonkwo’s friend Obierika, who afterwards, when asked by Okonkwo why he did not come with them to kill the boy, goes as far as to scold Okonkwo, warning him that his action “will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families” (46). Obierika does not question the decree ordering Ikemefuna’s death, noting that “if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it” (47)—but Okonkwo lacks his friend’s sapience, seeing only the choice of killing or not killing, and acts in his characteristic, fear-driven rashness.

As proud as Okonkwo is of his “latest show of manliness” (46), however, even he is not emotionally unaffected by the killing of Ikemefuna. For two days afterwards, he refuses to eat and cannot sleep, and spends his time drinking palm-wine in his hut in an attempt to forget what he has done (44). Reflecting over his own emotions, he disapproves of them and calls himself “a shivering old woman,” and tries to reason with his feelings, arguing that a man who has “killed five men in battle” should not “fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number” (45). Patrick C. Nnoromele calls the death of Ikemefuna an invocation of “contrasting emotional reactions . . . which dramatizes what Okonkwo apprehend[s] as a dichotomy between strength and gentleness” (par. 27). Okonkwo’s ideas of manliness not only force him to participate in the execution of Ikemefuna, but also disallow the inevitable emotions of grief and regret that follow the killing.

Though a respected man of high rank, who usually enjoys reverence among his clansmen, there are several more instances of Okonkwo being in discord with the clan, its people and its norms. At one point, he is contradicted at a kindred meeting by a man named Osugo, whom he then insults by implying that he is a woman, since he has no titles (19). Okonkwo, clearly higher in rank, with his two titles (6), is forced to apologize after everyone at the meeting sides with Osugo, amid comments that Okonkwo should be humble, as his “palm-kernels had been cracked for him by a benevolent spirit” (19); something Okonkwo mutely denies. Akers Rhoads notes that “[m]ost villagers . . . though respecting industry and success, dislike the pride which causes a man like Okonkwo to deal brusquely with other men” (67), and cites a passage where an old man uses a proverb to describe Okonkwo: “Looking at a king’s mouth . . .

one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast" (19)—though Okonkwo has taken two titles, he too started out with none, and should not judge those who have not come as far as he has.

### The origins of Okonkwo's extremism

The driving force behind Okonkwo's overly masculine nature appears to be a fear of failure, and the origins of this fear can be found within his own family. The "unsuccessful men" (3) with whom Okonkwo has no patience include his own, late father, Unoka, whom he started loathing when he was just a child (10). A coward who liked neither wars nor blood (5), Unoka was also a debtor, owing cowries to all his neighbors (4). His laid-back attitude was quite the opposite of his son's, and Okonkwo still recalls the agony of finding out from a playmate that his father was *agbala*—as it turned out, not only a synonym for *woman*, but also a name for a man with no titles. Unoka loved music and nature (4), and was lazy with work (13). So Okonkwo grew ashamed of his father (6), and ended up "ruled by one passion—to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness" (10). This passion creates a fear that comes to define him:

. . . [H]is whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. (9–10)

Okonkwo's fear and passionate loathing for his father's character is deep, and although the original cause may be rational—he disapproves of laziness because of the suffering his father's laziness caused him—it has gone far beyond it and become irrational. His father's love for the beauty of nature has been turned into a fear, and so Okonkwo sees only nature's malice. His father loves feasts (4); Okonkwo cannot enjoy them, since they involve the idleness that he hates. Unoka, though he often looks "haggard and mournful" (4), has a sense of humor and can laugh "loud and long" (6)—again in contrast with Okonkwo's unemotionality. When Unoka is old and ailing, his "love of talk ha[s] grown. It trie[s] Okonkwo's patience beyond words" (18). Indeed, Okonkwo

is “not a man of many words” (76); he stammers, and chooses to “use his fists” when he is angry and unable to “get his words out quickly enough” (3). Yet the art of conversation is an admirable quality among the Igbo; the white District Commissioner fails to see it as anything but a waste of time, and mentions their “love of superfluous words” (146), but orators are praised by the clan elders, along with farmers, wrestlers and warriors (82). Unoka’s friend Okoye is described as a “great talker” who uses many proverbs. Okoye is a musician like Unoka, but unlike Unoka he is also a prosperous man with titles and three wives (5). Just like Okonkwo oversimplifies masculinity, he also oversimplifies his father and rejects everything Unoka stood for.

### Consequences and Okonkwo’s downfall

While the novel starts out on a positive note, telling of a successful man who has risen from nothing and made his own fortune, the plot progresses to tell the story of his prosperity declining—in the words of the title of the novel, things fall apart for Okonkwo, and the reason they do has to do with his excessive masculinity.

There are five major events in the novel that play crucial parts in Okonkwo’s downfall. Four of them are the actual deaths of four different people, all of which Okonkwo causes; the fifth is the alienation of his first son, in a way a spiritual and psychological death, as Okonkwo ends up disowning him and refusing to acknowledge their relation.

The first death is that of Ikemefuna, which has already been discussed. It is an event which leaves Okonkwo traumatized; which causes an external conflict between Okonkwo and those who oppose his part in the killing, and an internal conflict between his emotions and his principles, as has been shown; and which, in addition, fuels the conflict between Okonkwo and Nwoye, as will be discussed further ahead.

The second death caused by Okonkwo occurs in the feverish tumult at the funeral of Ezeudu. As the clan warriors fire their guns and clang their matchets together in a frenzied ceremony, Okonkwo accidentally shoots and kills Ezeudu’s son (86). He is forced to flee the land, leaving his prosperous life in Umuofia behind, and “seek refuge in his motherland” (91). He is allowed to return after seven years because the killing was unintentional, but he never manages to regain his old position, even though he has carefully planned a triumphant comeback. While this event is not necessarily a direct

result of Okonkwo's masculine extremism, it deserves a mention since it is a major event in the process of his downfall, and since it is in fact a result of his manly behavior. The clanging of matchets and firing of guns are the conduct of men and warriors, and it is not a reasonable assumption that Okonkwo participated with great enthusiasm.

The third event is the alienation and figurative death of Okonkwo's first son. Nwoye is under constant scrutiny from his father, who believes he is seeing tendencies to laziness in him—and laziness, one of Unoka's traits, is something Okonkwo loathes. Seeing his son resembling Unoka makes Okonkwo anxious, so he seeks to set Nwoye straight by scolding and beating him (10). Ironically, these reprimands fail to do anything but give Nwoye a sad face, thus making him resemble his grandfather even more—for except when drinking or playing music, Unoka had a sorrowful look (4). Yet Okonkwo keeps nagging at his son, to “stamp out the disquieting signs of laziness,” even when he knows that Nwoye's young age prevents him from understanding certain things. When Okonkwo, Nwoye and Ikemefuna are preparing seed-yams, threats of broken jaws accompany the boys' mistakes. Yams are a symbol of manliness (23), and it is crucial that no son of Okonkwo's turn out anything less than a man.

For a while, Nwoye seems to begin to comply with his father's will. He enjoys being requested to do “one of those difficult and masculine tasks in the home, like splitting wood, or pounding food,” complaining aloud in feigned annoyance about women—to Okonkwo's inward delight, who sees it as a sign that his son will “be able to control his women-folk” when the time comes. So he is pleased with his son's development, which is largely due to Ikemefuna, whose arrival and integration in the family “seem[s] to have kindled a new fire in the younger boy.” Okonkwo encourages Nwoye further by telling the boys violent, masculine stories—and Nwoye listens, but inwardly prefers the women's less violent stories, such as those of “the tortoise and his wily ways” (37). Akers Rhoads points out that these “wily ways” are “techniques available to the weak” (67)—that is, since women and children lack the physical strength of grown men, they need to use their cunning instead, to achieve what they want. Okonkwo certainly would not approve of these stories, which might lead Nwoye to think he does not need to be strong and manly, since there are alternative ways to deal with things.

As Champion asserts, Ikemefuna's death is a key event in the novel (274). For Nwoye, it marks the end of the period of his life that saw an improvement, albeit superficial, in his relation with his father. The death of his new and beloved brother, killed by his own father, makes him lose faith in the traditions that arbitrarily demand that an innocent boy be killed. In another ironical twist in Okonkwo's attempts to make sure his son grows up to be a man, his manly obligation to kill Ikemefuna turns Nwoye away from the conservative, masculine path that his father urgently wants for him. Eventually, Nwoye disowns his father and joins the Christian missionaries, whose teachings seem to satisfyingly confirm and explain the doubts he has had about the cruel customs of his clan's religion. Okonkwo, meanwhile, is deeply abhorred by his son's decision: "To abandon the gods of one's father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens [is] the very depth of abomination." He goes as far as to convince himself that his wife has "played him false" and been unfaithful, since Okonkwo, "popularly called the 'Roaring Flame' . . . could [not] have begotten a son like Nwoye, degenerate and effeminate" (108). After Nwoye has forsaken his family to be schooled by the Christian missionaries, Okonkwo gathers his five younger sons in his hut to warn them:

'You have all seen the great abomination of your brother. Now he is no longer my son or your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If any one of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now while I am alive so that I can curse him. If you turn against me when I am dead I will visit you and break your neck.' (121–122)

Instead of learning from his mistake with Nwoye, he keeps up his hard-line method of upbringing, fervently trying to instill masculinity in his sons.

Ultimately, several of Okonkwo's masculine traits contribute to his doom, and the third person to die by Okonkwo's hand in the novel is a Christian court messenger. While many of his clansmen are willing to accept the good things brought by the Christian missionaries, even if they do not succumb to the new religion, Okonkwo's pride and strict adherence to the customs of his clan prevents him from admitting anything favorable about them. The Christian messages of love obviously do not appeal to the unemotional Okonkwo, and he knows that he could never achieve his "great

passion—to become one of the lords of the clan” (92)—in a society with a white man’s government. So he urges his clansmen to go to war against the Christians, labeling everyone who thinks otherwise a coward. His aggressive belligerence is what finally drives him to act on his own. Provoked by a decree brought by a court messenger, he slays the man in a heartbeat, unable to come up with a verbal retort. When he realizes that his clan is not behind him, he returns home and hangs himself in a tree behind his compound, completing the fourth death. Even though suicide is “an offence against the Earth” according to his beliefs, his pride drives him to kill himself, knowing his body will be considered “evil” (147), when the only alternative is succumbing to the people that he considers his enemies.

## Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to examine the masculinity of Okonkwo, the protagonist, to see if and how it contributes to the collapse of his prosperous life. This examination was to be performed in four steps. Firstly, Okonkwo’s masculine traits were to be identified. Secondly, his masculinity was to be compared to the rest of the clan. Thirdly, the origins of his masculinity were to be examined. Finally, the consequences of his overly manly behavior were to be investigated.

In establishing Okonkwo’s masculine traits, a secondary source was used to identify a number of human traits that are considered stereotypically masculine. These traits were used as a reference in the examination of the masculinity of the protagonist. A lot of the stereotypically male traits can indeed be found in Okonkwo; physical strength, bravery, pride, domination and aggression are all examples of important character traits in Okonkwo that are also stereotypically masculine traits.

While the clan of Umuofia holds manliness in high regard, it is in general not as obsessed with manliness as Okonkwo, who goes to extreme lengths with his masculinity. Umuofia allows for both feminine and masculine virtues, but out of fear of being thought weak, Okonkwo must constantly prove his manliness. Furthermore, he has an arrogant pride, and no respect for those who are not as well off as he is.

Okonkwo’s fear of weakness, which is the cause of his masculine extremism, stems from a passionate hatred of his father, Unoka. As a young boy, Okonkwo suffered because of his father’s laziness. Unoka could not provide for his family, and Okonkwo

was taunted for having a “woman” for a father. Okonkwo thus came to be ruled by a passionate, irrational hatred for everything his father stood for, which resulted in his industrious, but also aggressive and violent character.

Throughout the novel, Okonkwo’s prosperity declines. A series of deaths caused by Okonkwo can be seen as important events, each of which marks a step towards his final downfall. These events are consequences of his hostile, overly masculine behavior, which he tries to force onto his first-born son, Nwoye. As another consequence, Nwoye ends up confused and doubtful about the customs of the clan, and when he finds a way out through Christianity, he disowns his father. Okonkwo does not learn from his mistakes, but keeps up his compulsive manliness and tries to force it onto others. Ultimately, his pride drives him to suicide, after his aggressive and dominative behavior fails him.

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