

Dead mens path
theme analysis
literature essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ Dead Men’s Path” is a short story written in 1972 by African Author Chinua Achebe. It is about Michael Obi, a young and energetic man excited about all things modern who is just assigned a position to run a traditional school. Not long into the job, he finds that along with his misguided zeal, ignoring the traditions of his people can have great consequences.

Obi is a bright and enthusiastic young man who is excited to find out that he will be the new headmaster of a school that has been in desperate need of help for some time. Obi was considered a “ pivotal teacher” and he and his wife are both forward thinking and eager to share the modern life with everyone. Chinua Achebe shows the Obi’s modern enthusiasm by writing: “ We shall do our best,” she Obi’s wife) replied. “ We shall have such beautiful gardens and everything will be just modern and delightful...” He also shows Obi’s views of the traditionalist people by attacking their character referring to them as, “ these old and superannuated people in the teaching field.” Of his two goals for the school, one was to make the grounds a place of beauty. An upcoming inspection was the perfect motivation to begin what he thought to be great improvements. In time the gardens blossomed with beautiful red and yellow flowers. As Obi is admiring his work, he comes across an old woman from the village who walks straight across the flowers onto what Obi discovers to be an old faint almost unused path. Obi speaks to a teacher and finds out exactly what the path was used for. “ It amazes me,” said Obi to one of the teachers who had been three years in the school, “ that you people allowed the villagers to make use of this footpath. It is simply incredible.” He shook his head. “ The path,” the teacher said apologetically, “ appears to be very important to them. Although it is hardly used, it connects

the village shrine with their place of burial." Obi didn't care about the reason and for fear that the coming inspector may see people on school grounds who didn't belong, demanded that the footpath be closed off immediately regardless of warnings from the teacher. The path was then blocked with heavy logs and reinforced with barbed wire. A priest was sent by the outraged villagers to try and talk some sense into Obi, pressing upon him the significance that the path has not to just the villagers, but also the dead who walk the path." Look here my son, this path was here before you were born and before your father was born. The whole life of the village depends on it. Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it. But most important, it is the path of children coming in to be born." Obi rejected the priest's words and in mocking replied to him " Dead men don't walk." he dismissed his ancestry and instead chose the modern way. The path remained blocked and a few days later a village woman died in childbirth. The villagers took that as a sign that if the path remains blocked they would suffer great misfortune. Believing that the mother would be unable to rest in peace and the child unable to walk the path and enter the world, the villagers became agitated and tore down a school building as well as everything used to block the path and the flowers planted to impress the inspector. When the inspector finally arrived, he was presented with grounds that were completely destroyed along with a headmaster who thought only about himself and erasing the past to become modern.

In the story, with the descriptions of the pretentious headmaster and his lack of respect for the elders and their traditions the narrator clearly has taken sides with the villagers. Chinua Achebe writes, " The whole purpose of our

school is to eradicate such beliefs as that. Dead men do not require footpaths. The whole idea is just fantastic. Our duty is to teach your children to laugh at such ideas.” The main point in question in the story is in reference to the villager’s beliefs and customs and the importance it held in their lives. Obi was wrong in his thinking and in his methods, believing that he can just cut the people off from what in our time would be considered a funeral. When it comes to the destruction and rejection of something that was and is important to people such as traditions no matter how old the customs may be, nobody has the right to negate a person’s background and nobody has the ability to remove a person’s belief and substitute it with their own. An unfamiliar cultures belief may seem fanciful but to those who believe it, it is as much a vital part of their lives as technology is in ours. The heart of a person’s belief is in having faith although what you believe can never be proven. What happens in death is a perfect example of this. Nobody alive can know what happens after death so we are left with our imaginations to hope that our loved ones are in a better place rather than in the ground or left as ashes. People need that faith to carry on because at times the thought of never again seeing those people can be unbearable. Our ancestor’s traditions and customs are important because the only knowledge we have of things we have no proof on is in the things passed down for generations. Just as the story explained, the villagers were so strong in their beliefs of the path that when it became blocked they attacked the school and everything that was blocking the sacred path: “ The beautiful hedges were torn up not just near the path but right around the school... flowers trampled...one of the school buildings torn down...” The importance of a person’s culture is more than just the faith of a single person, it

connects a group of people who believe alike and allows them to work together with the same end results. As stated in Achebe's *Dead Men's Path*, contemporary community shouldn't do as Obi and try to eradicate the core of a people's beliefs which, with his mocking reply to the priest is just what he tried to do. " ...Our duty is to teach your children to laugh at such ideas." It is important to remember and to honor traditions. Many people fight to keep their traditions alive, whether it's an old woman making her 80th annual pilgrimage to a Mexican cemetery to light a candle at Dona Candelaria de Sapien's grave or Native American tribe members dressed in full ceremonial clothing dancing to celebrate the coming rain. In Achebe's story, the people fought to keep the path free so that those who pass on can rest in peace and the traditions of the villagers can carry on for generations to come, far beyond the lives of the priests, villagers and Obi.