

Okonkwo as morally ambiguous character

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



" Things Fall Apart" by Chinua Achebe describes tribal life in the jungles of Africa and speaks about Ibo community before the arrival of a white man. The main character of the story, Okonkwo, can be described as morally ambiguous because, on the one hand, he is a man of greatness, although, on the other hand, such qualities as violence and gender discrimination are inherent to him. Certain aspects of novel, as, for example, his suicide at the end, show that his character is of ambiguous nature.

Moral ambiguity is important for the overall theme of the story as the author is willing to prove that people are very rarely purely good or evil.

Thus, Achebe tends to create characters that are more applicable for the readers, not to create moral standing images. (Leach, p. 1053) Okonkwo is morally dynamic character. On the one hand, he is sensitive to his family, children and friends, but, on the other hand, he attempts to rebel his father exhibiting the tendency to violence and power of physical strength.

The author shows that his character is developed by the situation he is presented with. Thus, the character has to respond to swiftly changing situations and to act depending on them.

In the beginning of the book we see that Okonkwo is respected and he is satisfied with his success. He works hard towards his goal to become rich and famous. He is a man of great physical and moral strength. The issue of moral ambiguity arises, when Okonkwo simply discards his father not respecting and following the qualities he exhibits. Lack of self-discovery and moral resolution shows ambiguous nature of the character. (Noromele, 200)

The main character flaw is presented by Achebe as: " But his whole life was

dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness...It was not external but lay deep within himself.

It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father". (Achebe, p. 13) Okonkwo's reflections about tribal order, family members and social status prove that Ibo society associates men only with strength. Okonkwo's son by his first wife is described as a woman-like being a serious insult. After Ikemefuna's death main hero can't understand his sorrow asking himself: " When did you become a shivering old woman? " (Achebe, p. 62) The fear not to become fragile makes Okonkwo work hard accumulating material possessions and justifying his manhood – good harvest, wives and honors.

His fear suppresses him to express the feelings of sympathy, gentles, empathy and compassion. Instead, he refers to violence to escape from frustrated emotions. For example, he prefers " wrestling during his youth and later becoming a renowned warrior". (Achebe, p. 69) Achebe shows that Okonkwo is man of action rather than a man of thought. Okonkwo earns respect of villages due to his violence, but he doesn't realize that violence will lead him to moral destruction, exile and ultimate death.

Achebe illustrates that Okonkwo's fear to become weak and fragile makes him commit numerous transgressions against social laws in community. Okonkwo beats his third wife during the Week of Peace as the week is dedicated to the Earth goddess Ani. Achebe writes that Okonkwo " is not the man to stop beating someone half-way through, not even for fear of goddess". (Achebe, p. 30) Okonkwo thinks that showing personal strength

values more than displaying deference to goddess. The turning point in the story is when Okonkwo kills a young clansman at the funeral.

He is exiled for seven years. When Okonkwo returns to his village, he sees the presence of white men and establishment of the new law. Instead of being supported to take revenge, Okonkwo faces hesitation and doubt realizing that the spirit of clan is dead. Summing up, Okonkwo is morally ambiguous character presented as a man of greatness, although being ready to violate social and natural laws. Okonkwo works hard to become rich and famous, but he permits violence and intolerance to justify his manhood. It is Okonkwo's fear of weakness that leads him to moral destruction.

In the end Okonkwo faces what he fears the most – weakness and inability to take action. In the image of Okonkwo the author shows that there are no purely good or evil personalities. Works Cited Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann, 1958. Leach, Josephine. A Study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in mid-America. *The English Journal*, 60, 8 (1971): pp. 1052-1056. Noromele, Patrick. 22 March 2000. *The Plight of A Hero in Achebe s Things Fall Apart*. College Literature, available at <http://www.highbeam.com/College+Literature/publications.aspx>