

The clash between traditional and modern values english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



English 1A Interpretation THE CLASH BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND MODERN VALUES" A Dead Men's Path" is a short story written by Chinua Achebe about a prospective young headmaster who upon his ignorance disrespects his ancestry; which results in catastrophes. The protagonist in this story is an energetic man named Michael Obi, who was appointed as the new headmaster of Ndume Central School. Mr. Obi, after the appraisal, had in mind many wonderful ideas and he decided to change many of the old traditions, which, as he worded, was kept by the " old and less educated one". Unfortunately, one of them was the narrow path that crosses through the school. The path was there for many centuries, and it has symbolic meaning to many of the villagers. After Mr. Obi boldly blocked the path, the village priest, Ani, tried to reason with him. However, a man as superior as he was, he persistently ignored the priest's warning. The villagers were fumed with wrath of anger, and as the result, pulled down the school. The author, using this simple story to illustrate the importance of tradition and respecting what may seem peculiar and strange to the younger generation, however, held special meaning to those that have stood by it for many centuries. In the first paragraph of the story, the protagonist, Michael Obi, is described as young, lively, enthusiastic, as well as outspoken. It is reasonable to believe that Obi's youthful energy is the representation of the author's passion for modernizing the education of African children. Notice that the story takes place in the rural area of Africa, where superstitious beliefs are common and widely accepted. Michael was considered by many as a " pivotal teacher" and a forward-thinking man; hence it is possible to comprehend why he was chosen to take charge a school that has been in

desperate need of help for some time. Obi's modern character and values stand in stark contrast to the tribal character and traditional values of the residents of Ndume. Using a third person objective, the villagers are often described as ignorant, superstitious, old, and hobbled—the very opposite of Obi. The arrogance within his character is noticeably revealed by his rejection of other people's opinions he often regarded as "old and less-educated ones". Michael is determined to change the old ways and methods that have, as he proclaimed, condemned the school's progress for many centuries: "I was thinking what a grand opportunity we've got at last to show the people how a school should be run"(pg). However, this sign of egotism without any doubt provokes hatred within people towards him. Michael's wife, who shared aforementioned characteristic trait with him, fully supported his views and remarked what they are doing is righteous and benevolent. Contrastingly, she is more interested in her sudden rise in social standing than for the actual good they both could do. Another interesting thing is what they promise to accomplish is simply a false cover for the hubris that they are savoring. His plans include improving the quality of teaching and upgrading school facilities. This is idealist, however, unrealistic. In a place, where people are struggling day by day to survive, academic knowledge is unnecessary. The lack of understanding of what people really need makes him an unconcerned leader about what people really want. One thing became a reality was the garden that his wife took care of. This leads to an incident that occurred while he was taking his leisure walk; he met an unruffled woman who crossed school ground during night time curfews. The discovery of the ancient passage that has been used by native people for

centuries in his school, provided an unpleasant feeling, and made him feel powerless, inferior, unlike a school ' s principal that he's meant to be. Of course, this leads to blocking of the path as he does not wish for the inspector to see random strangers on the school property. His actions primitively resolve around superficial appearances, in which the sole thing that he concerns about is what others think of him. Conveniently, he is able to ignore all the consequences later. Even though, the path is seldom used by the villagers, it symbolically represents the old traditional values that the villagers had stood by for many generations: " although it is hardly used, it connects the village shrine with their place of burial" (pg 176). It is important to understand how significant this path is to the villagers and how skeptical Michael is, based on his modern wisdom, to disbelieve such " ridiculous" ideas. Although a precedent warning was given, he decided to proceed. This challenging act is a demonstrative behavior to prove his superiority over the community. By setting the fence that blocked the trail, Michael symbolically set up a conflict between the new modern ways and the old traditional values. Not long after, the people responded by sending in a representative, the village priest named Anito solve the contradiction of the two sides. Ani is described by the narrator as a humble albeit rather authoritative old man. The priest understood Michael's inexperience, he calmly explained the importance of the path not only to the villagers who used it, but the dead as well as who walked among it: " Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it, but most importantly, it is the path of children coming into be born" (pg 176). Michael purposefully ignored what the priest said and continue to ridicule the priest's belief by saying: " Dead men do not

require footpaths. The whole idea is just fantastic. Our duty is to teach your children to laugh at such ideas." Michael is quite mistaken to evaluate other people's beliefs and insists he was right. This behavior is rather immature, and can lead to serious consequences if not corrected immediately.

Endurance is not sustainable. Ani realized it is difficult to convince Michael, consequently he decided to leave a profound statement hoping its echoes could transform Michael's mind: " If you reopen the path we shall have nothing to quarrel about. What I always say is: let the hawk perch and let the eagle perch". With a significant meaning, Ani hoped Michael could realize the prominent of individual's faiths. They are willing to sacrifice all to defend that belief, even if it means sacrificing one's life. Hence, it is wise for Michael to respect the villagers' belief, although he might not accept it. The inevitable will happen. Michael's stubbornness simply does not bring him any gains, except pain and suffering. After a two-day path block, as a coincidence a woman in the village dies in childbirth. Perhaps this does not have anything to do with the blocking of the path, but that is not what the villagers thought. The indignation of the people in the village, in addition with the tragic death of the innocent woman has blinded the villagers' judgment. They refused to believe this is a coincidence. They only believe in one thing - Michael is responsible for this dreadful agony. A diviner recommends heavy sacrifices to appease the spirits who are insulted at having the footpath blocked. Michael's hopes and dreams and all the things that he believed in were vanished when the outraged villagers came and abolished the school. No matter how wise he is, there is absolutely nothing he can do to save the situation. The collapse of the fence is a sign of the glorious triumph of

traditional values, along with the representation of the villagers' resistance against the intrusion of modernism. The story concludes with the arrival of the government education officer, and his severe assessment about Michael's illogical workarounds, in addition to the serious losses that Michael has brought up: " tribalwar situation developing between the school and the village, arising in part from the misguided zeal of the new headmaster." The obvious truth is that humans are not easily subdued. Michael has a lot of talents and potentials, but the lack of professionalism in dealing with sensitive issues such as this has brought him unforeseeable consequences. Power and arrogance has immersed him in glory, and made him despise the true value - traditional values. The loss, as well as a valuable lesson for Michael, could have been prevented if it wasn't because of his stubbornness. Traditions weren't established accidentally. They are protected and preserved for centuries by our ancestors. Therefore, no one has the right to ridicule and eliminate any traditions, although it may be viewed as obsolete and redundant by the different generations. Work Cited: Achebe, Chinua. " Dead Men's Path." Backpack Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama. By X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006. 174-77. Print.