

# Oedipus rex and things fall apart: hubris and calamity

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Oedipus, Hamlet, MacBeth, Achilles, and Okonkwo. For eons, different societies around the earth have kept an analogous tradition of recording stories that relate human experience and interaction with the gods, showcasing a fearful reverence towards them. It is when a character tries to go against these very gods that a tragic hero is born. In “ Things Fall Apart” by Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian tragedy, and Oedipus Rex of Greek descent two characters share a similar “ fatal flaw” that inevitably leads to their decadence.

Oedipus Rex is estimated to have been written around 430 B. C. by the well known playwright of that time, Sophocles. And Okonkwo from the more recent age of 1958. Both incorporate the same plot structure. The example being that man, no matter how seemingly powerful, can in no way surpass the gods.

Both authors display this in a format that is frequently used to formulate the organization of a tragedy by the words of Greek philosopher, Aristotle. Who, in his knowledge, identified the primary points a character must go through to qualify a tragedy. These being hamartia, anagnorisis, peripeteia, and catharsis. Both Oedipus and Okonkwo suffer from the same fatal flaw known as hamartia, hubris, or excessive pride. Where, inevitably, in the end their pride is what gets the best of them. Our stories open by giving the reader information about the whereabouts of the hero and those around them.

“ Things Fall Apart” reveals Nigerian culture of the late 1800s to early 1900s. It introduces Okonkwo, the hero, and immediately establishes his ideals, the resentment he has for his father, and his trepidation of failure. Giving an

impression of who he is. The depiction of his battle with Amalinze the Cat as an adolescent, is told early on. This is used as a testament that Okonkwo is both formidable, and respected in his village, earning him a myriad of titles. Likewise, Oedipus is presented as having already solved the riddle of the Sphinx, saving the city of Thebes, and earning him the title of king.

But a dilemma has risen, the region has fallen into blight where not only had the land become infertile, but women and infants both were dying at an alarming rate. Oedipus, having preserved the kingdom once, is shown to be relied on by his people to banish the harrowing plague. He is revered just as Okonkwo was to his people. This type of opening is called *media res*, or in the midst of action. Previously having found out about the prophecy from Creon, Oedipus's hubris is introduced. In all of his self appointed glory, he insists Creon state the prophecy for all to hear shouting, " Upon the murderer I invoke this curse— whether he is one man and all unknown, or one of many—may he wear out his life in misery to miserable doom!"(266).

This depicts how highly Oedipus thinks of himself, impulsively he casts down a curse on the murderer of King Laius- which, from that, stems verbal irony. Whilst Okonkwo is shown in how he handles confrontation with other people. The passage states " He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men." (Achebe 3). This shows, like Oedipus, that Okonkwo is quick to act and slow to reason, foreshadowing what his impulsivity and hubris drive him to do later.

These are just the first of many examples to come later in the story.

Concerning fate, which is fundamental in our heroes' stories, both Okonkwo and Oedipus try to defy their gods and revolutionize their destiny in accordance with their greater sense of pride. Oedipus directly does it by acting in evident rebellion of the Oracle of Delphi, in which he finds out that he is fated to murder his father and marry his mother. In impious reaction he runs from his adopted birth land to the other side of Mount Cithaeron, but ends up nevertheless landing one step closer to the oracles' prognostication. In many of Oedipus's actions irony, in this case dramatic irony, is prevalent due to the fact that on his travels away from home he comes to a crossroad where he has a dispute with another traveler. The confrontation ends in death.

Unbeknownst to Oedipus, he has just initiated the first segment of the oracle's prophecy. Likewise, in secondary dramatic contrast we have Okonkwo, who tries to retaliate against fate in a more subtle way. He does this by doing everything in his power to not become like his father, which in the end only contributes to his downfall. Not only that but he dishonors the traditions of "The Week of Peace". "In his anger he had forgotten that it was the week of peace- But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess", (Achebe 29-30) later getting him shamed by his people.

Furthermore, he acts out against his greater oppressor, the British and Christian missionaries, numerous times. Hubris acts as a blindfold to our heroes, which is ironic for Oedipus. The first sign of blindness manifests as Oedipus mocks Tiresias, a blind seer, paradoxical or not Oedipus shouts "It <https://assignbuster.com/oedipus-rex-things-fall-apart-hubris-and-calamity/>

has, but not for you; it has no strength for you because you are blind in mind and ears as well as in your eyes" (429). Alone this is rich with verbal irony, but it will shortly foreshadow his fate. Furthermore, when Oedipus finds out that King Laius has been murdered he lets hubris inhibit him from recognizing who the true murderer is, him.

For Okonkwo, it is stubborn pride that binds him to his fate by refusing to discern that times were changing in Umuofia and the British had become a more powerful adversary than he'd let himself believe. Supporting this claim is the murder of Ikemefuna. Okonkwo had such a great deal of hubris that he'd slay the ones he cared about in order to preserve it. By virtue of these characters actions and willful violation of the gods, hamartia is marked by their hubris which fulfills yet another integral piece in Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy. Subsequently comes peripeteia, which for our friend Oedipus turns out to be what was thought to be good news by the messenger. He comes forth to Oedipus giving word about his parents stating, " Because Polybus was no kin to you in blood.

.. A gift he took you from these hands of mine..." (1147). Inversely, Oedipus is devastated upon becoming conscious that the prophecy had instead been actualized. This is where anagnorisis materializes with Aristotle defining it as " a change from ignorance to knowledge". For Oedipus it is when he makes the connection that Laius was indeed his father, slain by his own hands, and that Jocasta, his wife, had been the mother he was fated to wed.

Okonkwo meets a similar fate and experiences two noticeable peripeteias, the first being with him beating his son Nwoye. He wanted Nwoye to become

strong, to become just as tenacious as he had been in his younger years. But instead Nwoye converts to Christianity, shaming his father in the fullest. Okonkwo even declared “ 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” (Achebe 172). He expected the beating to make Nwoye stronger and like him, but when the exact opposite happened he felt nothing but antipathy for him. In light of that our heroes’ second meeting with peripeteia is when the British and Christian missionaries gained substantial ground with many Igbo people as converts. Okonkwo is abhorred by, as he see’s it, the demoralization of his once formidable tribe.

He reminisces “ Isike will never forget how we slaughtered them in that war. We killed twelve of their men and they killed only two of ours. Before the end of the fourth market week they were suing for peace. Those were days when men were men” (Achebe 200). Hence he takes violent action against the impending impasse, the text indicating, “ In a flash Okonkwo drew his machete.

The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo’s machete descended twice and the man’s head lay beside his uniformed body”(Achebe 204). Anagnorisis is reached where he, in foolish impulsivity, comes to the grim realization that, unlike he speculated, Umuofia would not fight. Both our heroes come to a level of awareness. As they take another

step up the tiers of tragedy we come to find that ahead their final trial awaits them.

Alas our two stories come to an end, with one final plot twist to wrap it all up. Catharsis comes in many formats. For Oedipus, it comes upon reaching the full recognition of how sightless, through hubris, he has become. So in response, he does what any enlightened wise man would do in a situation such as his, he stabs his eyes out. “ They will never see the crime I have committed or had done upon me! Dark eyes, now in the days to come look on forbidden faces, do not recognize those whom you long for—with such imprecations”(1460), he proclaimed as he used Jocasta’s (now dead through suicide upon finding out the truth) brooch to complete the act. For our audience this evokes both pity and fear imagining, “ And the bleeding eyeballs gushed and stained his beard—no sluggish oozing drops but a black rain and bloody hail poured down.

” His catharsis was realizing his part in the blight of Thebes and realizing how blind he’d become. Correspondingly, “ Things fall Apart” greets catharsis when it depicts Okonkwo’s body hanging limply from a tree. He took what his tribe considered the dishonorable way out. He had refused to accept the change in which his village had gone through. In a last attempt to take control, not wanting his pride to ever be challenged, he ends his own life, leaving the audience with a bittersweet sadness. Okonkwo spent his time avoiding in every possible way becoming like his father when in the end he departed with the same titles as he.

This gives the audience a sense of pity for the fact that all of this man's life work had become nothing in the matter of a day, but also a feeling of relief grateful that it's not them. As the tribe sees what Okonkwo has done these words sum up Okonkwo catharsis perfectly, " That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." (Achebe 147). Only furthering the understanding of how strong of an impact Okonkwo had in his village. With the final prerequisite being fulfilled Okonkwo and Oedipus have become tragic heroes through the hubris in which they let consume them. While different in the culture, within both of our stories there lies a deeper meaning.

The simplest definition of a tragedy, according to Aristotle, is "... the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in appropriate and pleasurable language,...

in a dramatic rather than narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions." Our story is meant to portray something that is powered with deep emotion and has a lasting effect on the audience. That very thing gets personified in the bodies of Oedipus and Okonkwo. In reference to " Things fall apart", Chinua not only managed to scribe the tragic story of Okonkwo who let his hubris and refusal to change steepen his plight. He also told another tragedy; that of the dissolution of the Igbo people. The British's hubris was discovered in their treatment of the Igbo as a less civilized people not competent enough to understand their own situation.



So with that their colonization regime becomes hamartia. Colonization changed hundreds of people's lives, permitting peripeteia. The anagnorisis came only when people would fight for the ones under British control. But nonetheless, this tragedy was Chinua catharsis. This story provided him with the ability to tell the story of his people from a different perspective, a story that could better embody the cultures and traditions yet warn against hubris and the consequences of it.

In Oedipus it is easily most related as a testament to the belief and the time period in which it was written. Sophocles lived in an era when Greece was at war constantly. For power, for land, for wealth, whatever it may have been, wars were common. Not only that, but incestuous relations were also common. This environment helps shape the story and develop Oedipus as a character. Kings often sought more power and in their journey many of them found their inevitable end.

Sophocles personifies this as a display to the people of his time and as a testament. Man can never surpass the gods, if they try they will without a doubt fail and regret it. Sophocles uses every element in Oedipus to act as a symbol of those who seek too much power or forget their place to the gods: Hamartia, being hubris or the belief that one could become powerful enough to surpass them, anagnorisis, cautioning to those who try only to find they will have to face the turnaround of their actions with dire consequences, followed by peripeteia where they will find their plight, and with catharsis being the reprieve of those who are forewarned of these things. For both of our heroes this stands to be true, and both Oedipus and Okonkwo chose to not heed warning, resulting in their demise through actions guided by hubris.

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“ A man cannot become a hero until he can see the root of his own downfall.” These words by Aristotle hold ever true in that both of our stories revolve around one tragic flaw that our heroes possess, hubris that was so deeply rooted it inhibited our characters from reaching their highest potential as human beings.

Hubris blinded Oedipus from the truth, it was hubris that impulsively ended Laius's life, it impeded Oedipus from realizing his fate until the time was too far gone. Oedipus became a victim of his own pride. Okonkwo followed likewise. Justification for this could be seen when hubris wouldn't let Okonkwo grow close to his son. It was hubris that executed Ikemefuna, the very hubris that persuaded and drove our hero to the extreme of suicide. In the summation of the two tragedies, it can be seen that throughout time humanity has suffered from an affliction that doesn't seem to change, an affliction that can be found from 430 B.

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