

## The Tragic Hero of the Modern Period: A Comparative Study of the African and the European Concepts

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### ARTICLE INFO

Received: October 18, 2019  
Accepted: November 23, 2019  
Published: December 31, 2019  
Volume: 2  
Issue: 7  
DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2019.2.7.20

### KEYWORDS

*Appendages, tragic traditions, anti-hero, tragedy, dual personality, pessimism*

### ABSTRACT

It is very clear that there is a foundation for cultural dimensions in modern tragedy. This is because the tragic hero differs from culture to culture in the modern society. As a result of this, it is crucial to point out that whereas the modern tragic hero in the Western culture is an anti-hero, in cultures such as, Asia and Africa, the tragic hero holds unto some traits of the Greek heroic figure. This paper, therefore, fulfills an identified need to study these two tragic traditions by juxtaposing the appendages of the traits of the Greek classical tragic hero in the African concept alongside with the unique personal characteristics of the European concept to present a new hero, whose personal lack of order does not present a deviation from the system, but confirms a dislocation in the system itself (Adade-Yeboah & Owusu, 2013a). The study provides extracts from the works of Beckett's, Miller, Achebe and Rotmi as supporting texts to present the two tragic traditions in the two modern periods.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

African tragedy believes in the cyclical structure where an action is reversible and because of this reason, the hero is community-oriented. The traditions of Africa have a stubborn believe in life after death which begins with the ancestors via the living and to the yet unborn. This belief makes it possible for the practitioners of this culture to situate conjoint experiences of life with their ancestors.

There was a dearth of tragedy in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when comedy became the major dramatic form. The 20<sup>th</sup> century being a complex age with an environment of crises where the value of the Biblical authority was questioned. Disorder, confusion and anxiety became the order of the day. Modern faith in the individual was, thus, relegated to the background by both poets and dramatists. It was rather upheld that at least some sort of crucial authority needs to be sought for. The plays of these modern writers were considered as social plays in which the ordinary person is made the hero, contrary to the classical era. In these circumstances, the heroes are victims of an

image that is blamed at the societal prejudices or values. This makes the tragic hero a complex character. The tragic situation is, therefore, difficult to understand because it is either structural or thematic.

What is more the tragic concept has been put in context of the perspective of the classical period, which defined and delineated its tragic hero on action-oriented and the tragic situation as context-oriented.

The centre of the African concept of tragedy has its underlying belief in the reversal of the calamity. At the centre of changing the fate of a person is associated with the institution of divination. To Adade-Yeboah & Owusu, (2013b), "The African concept is based on the assumption that through divination, fate can be realigned. The significance of the divination is concisely authorized in traditional folklore, where it is said that a man by his maker to render his account of life which has been a fruitful and joyful"

In this analysis, it is worthwhile to mention that the concept of African tragic mishap is not interpreted as

a disgrace, but rather as means to regeneration, which is the basis for African optimism at the tragic situation.

Wole Soyinka (1976) reaffirms that in his book 'Song of the Goat':

... thus, the death of an individual is not seen as an isolated incident in the life of one man. Nor is individual fertility separated from the regenerative promise of earth and sea. (p. 51)

### 1.1 Approach

Hammerseley (2008) believes that, "the task of writers of any work of Art is not just to produce a reading of a particular 'test' but also to use it to illuminate general issues about man's life". For a credible comparison, the textual analysis will be used for effective delineation of the two heroes. Atkins (1993) reiterates the use of textual analysis when he says, "almost every literary work is attended by lots of outside circumstances which, once we expose and explore them, suffuse it with additional meaning".

The justification of this close reading approach is that there is enormous positive influences on scholars to understand and have a fair view on "the way in which tests upheld the moral issues and codes of behaviours (and) "teach" readers about life and human nature" (Termizi & Ching, 2012).

## 2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### 2.1 Modern European Concept of the Tragic Hero

The 20<sup>th</sup> century works of art portray great innovations in the works of Thomas Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" and "Endgame". In his works, Beckett questions for formal structure which playwrights had felt obliged to respect the previous traditions. He believes that formal structure constitutes or mimeses or representation of a reality that upholds and inscribes the formlessness of existence without attempting to make it fit any model. Beckett (1961) posited:

"... That is why the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates".

Thomas Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" (1961) reveals a pessimistic vision of a man struggling to find a purpose and to have control of his fate. So characters like Pozzo, Lucky, Vladimir and Estragon have the feeling of hopelessness, bewilderedness and anxiety. Two lost creatures who play the role of tramps spend days waiting without clearly knowing whom they are waiting for and whether, the object of the waiting will

be a reality. In the plays of Beckett's: "Endgame" and "Waiting for Godot", the characters are grouped in symmetrical pairs. For example, in "Waiting for Godot" Hamm, a blind old man sits in a wheel chair.

Hamm is paralyzed and can no longer stand. His servant, Clov, is unable to sit down. In two ash-cans that stand by the wall are Hamm's legless parents, Nagg and Nell.

### 2.2 The Modern African Writer and Tragedy

The modern African writer has close links with the modern world. As a result, it makes it difficult for this writer to disassociate himself from the influences of Western literary forms and traditions. Consequently, writers like Soyinka, Ngugi and Achebe in the bid to rationalize African myths and legends in their tragic situations are, inadvertently, caught up in the webs of post-classical renaissance beliefs. Most African writers tend to conform to the requirements of the Renaissance which beliefs that the hero must be of eminent status cast in the mould of Macbeth, and King Lear. We therefore see characters like Okonkwo, Ezeulu in "Things Fall Apart" and Amanu in "Kurumi".

### 2.3 The European Hero and his Diverse Character Traits vis-a-vis the African Heroic and Legendary Statue of a Hero

One of the principal characteristic features of the 20<sup>th</sup> century hero is his diverse character traits. A typical example is seen in "Waiting for Godot" where there is no action. Characters are seen engaging themselves in nothingness. Two grotesque tramps waiting by a wretched tree on a deserted country road for the arrival of apparently important man called Godot. The two tramps are told that Mr. Godot cannot come until the next day. On hearing this, they both agree to leave yet their decision is not carried out.

Estragon: Vladimir  
Well, shall we go? Yes, let's go  
(they do not move)

There are always consistencies in their thinking process. For example, when Pozzo and Lucky first appear, neither Vladimir nor Estragon seems to recognize them. But when Pozzo and Lucky had left, we are surprised at Vladimir when he says the two people have changed. Estragon insists that he does not know them, while Vladimir claims otherwise:

Vladimir: Yes you do know them,  
No. I don't.  
Estragon: Know them not the same.  
Why didn't they recognize  
us then?

Vladimir: This means nothing. I too pretended  
Similarly, in *Endgame*, Hamm tells Clov: "I don't need you anymore" Yet, Hamm cannot do without Clov who serves him sincerely.

Each time, the two tramps in *Waiting for Godot* move as a pair, yet under deferring circumstances. An instance that, in each act, Vladimir and Estragon attempt suicide and fail for differing reasons.

It is Estragon who suggests suicide but asks Vladimir to try it first. Vladimir refuses on the grounds that he is heavier than Estragon. Estragon argues that if he dies, Vladimir will be lonely.

Estragon : Let us  
hung ourselves immediately  
Vladimir : Go  
ahead  
Estragon : After  
you

Interestingly, even though Lucky is the servant of Pozzo, he is a great teacher. He teaches Pozzo all the higher values of life:

Beauty, grace, and truth of the first  
water.

Hence these pairs of characters represent the relationship between body and mind, the material as the spiritual sides of man, with the intellect being subordinates to the body. The diverse nature of their characteristics as analyzed makes it difficult to determine their characters.

On the other hand, the tragic hero Okonkwo in "Things Fall Apart" rises from a humble beginning to become a prominent elder who is given the honour with titles in the land of Umuofia. He, therefore, satisfies the requirement of eminent status. Virtue of his high social standard which is narrated in the opening lines of Achebe's "Things Fall Apart".

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond.

His fame rested on his personal achievement.

As a young man of eighteen, he had brought honour to his village

by throwing Amanize the Cat (1958, 91)

It is a known fact that at such an age, most young men would rather be idling within the homestead. But on the contrary, Okwonko has already become almost an equal of the ancestral heroes and gods. The description of Okonkwo below suggests his heroic and legendary stature:

Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bushfire in the harmattan

He was tall and huge. And his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a sever look.

He has become such a trusted person that the society can count on him in times of trouble. For that reason, he is the one chosen to take the dreaded choice of war and peace to the people of Mbaino who have killed a citizen of Umuofia. By that same estimate, he becomes the obvious choice to take charge of Ikemefuna, one of the two reparations period by the people of Mbaino.

## 2.4 Fate and Character of the African and European Tragic Heroes

The African tragic heroes have moral flaws. As a result, they are responsible for their own downfall. The source of the tragic sufferings is the tragic flaw-character trait, even though fate may play a role in the tragedy of the hero. "Things Fall Apart" clearly illustrates the idea of fate and character. For example, Unoka, Okonkwo's father, is a non-achiever partly because of his laziness, and partly because of his fate. Achebe posits:

Unoka was an ill-fated man.  
He had a bad chi or personal  
god, an evil fortune followed  
him to the grave or rather to  
his death, for had no grave (p.  
13)

Similarly, it can be seen from the account of Okonkwo's success that the individual will is superior to the dictates of fate.

At an early age he had achieved  
fame as the greatest wrestler in  
the land. That was no luck...  
Okonkwo said *yes* very strongly;  
so his chi agreed. (p. 19)

Yes, later accidental shooting brings to ruin all that Okonkwo has been building up:

His life had been ruled by a  
great passion to become one of  
the lords of the clan... then  
everything had been broken. He  
had been cast out of his clan  
like a fish onto the dry, sandy  
beach, panting (p. 19)

This reversal of events as seen from the above quotation can be traced down to Okonkwo's own character traits. His fear of failure serves as a spring board from which his tragic sufferings spring.

The other heroes like Shaw's Joan, Miller's Proctor (1957a) and Willy Lowman (1949), are examples of the modern tragic heroes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. St. Joan (1924), a dramatic representation of the clash of ideas and forces within the society, is a remarkable play which represents Joan as a character who has an ethereal force behind her and speaks with an unwavering authority. The heroine, Joan, struggles as a young maid to assert her spiritual call to see to the return of France into the hands of the French.

Her resolute and brave character is seen in the play even till her death is suggested of martyrdom.

The European heroes, especially of Beckett's, are very creative. "Waiting for Godot" is structured on the promise of an arrival that never occurs, just as "Endgame" is structured on of a departure that never happens. This will seem to imply that these characters look forwards to the future, yet if there is no past, there can be neither present nor future. In order to be able to project onto what cannot be located and is perhaps a non-existent future the characters "invent" a past for themselves. They do this by investing stories (Worton, 2001).

In 'Endgame', Hamm says "she was bonny once like a flower of the field". Another example is, Hamm tells a story of a madman who thought the end of the world had come. These invented pasts are invariably remembered with nostalgia. In these plays we are confronted with characters who powerfully express the sense of deadness, of laden heaviness and hopelessness as suggested by (Adade-Yeboah & Owusu, 2013a).

The experience expressed in Beckett's plays is of a profound and fundamental nature. The plays reveal not only the experience and the sense of the tragic difficulties of becoming aware of one's own self in the merciless process of renovation and destruction that occur with change of time but also the difficulty of communication between human beings the unending quest for reality in a world in which everything is uncertain including the self-deception of friendship (Esslin, 2007).

Adade-Yeboah & Owusu (2013a) cited Esslin (2007): "What happens in these plays are not events with a beginning and an end, but types of situations that will never repeat themselves."

The blindness of Pozzo as well as the dumbness of Lucky are symbolic of human predicaments in their sinful modern world. As a result: "these characters assume their own unique character traits and are not easily focalized (Adade-Yeboah & Owusu, 2013a)." It is in the light of this, that these anti-heroes fit the tragic-comic genre of modern literature.

### **3. THE TRAGIC SOURCE OF THE TWO HEROES**

Okonkwo's, actions as the tragic hero in "Things fall Apart" (1958) cannot be taken as being motivated by mere wickedness but should be seen on as actions on his personal principles. The tragic course of the hero could be debited on his sense of guilt.

Much like his Renaissance hero, Okonkwo's tragic source is his emotions. It is therefore appropriate when Achebe says:

"Okonkwo's punishment meted out to him on the occasion of his accidental shooting of his kinsman, is unfortunate"

One cannot but feel that, Okonkwo has many a time been circumspect in his reaction to situations. His fear-motivated career leads him to go to the extremes.

Okonkwo, therefore, deliberately suppresses any feeling that might betray his humanness for the simple reason that, to be a man is to be tough. His wish to be the strong man of society is deceptive in itself. In his obsession he decides to do away with the fact that, a man does have five feeling; and that a show of coarse dealings does not in the end make a man, but a beast.

In addition to this, Okonkwo's wealth makes him a bully and arrogant who treats unsuccessful men with contempt. Hence, Okonkwo calls a man without a title "a woman" in a clan meeting without the least provocation. This is perhaps a reflection of his father, Unoka's image in every unsuccessful man.

It is for this same reason Okonkwo descends heavily on his son, Nwoye's neck whenever Okonkwo sees as "feminine" character or Unoka (his father) tendencies. He is portrayed as a symbol of the warrior spirit of the traditional Ibo society and a vector of the cultural values of that society.

Yet, there is still something of an irony in the relationship between Okonkwo and his people. Even though he is an embodiment of the cultural values of the society, he ironically has an intermittent conflict with the very society because of some of his actions which is a repulsion of the values he embodies.

One of his tragic sources is his fury which dictates his actions (Adade-Yeboah & Owusu, 2013b). This is evidenced in his speech when he was in exile at Mbanta when he hears of the arrival of the missionaries. He says:

If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the

floor, what do I do? Do  
I shut my eyes? No! I  
take a stick and break  
his head.

The worse of Okonkwo's tragic suffering occurs when his own son, Nwoye, deserts home to join the religion that has caught many people like a fever. This piece of news further exposes Okonkwo's fury as he contemplates revenge. The clan blames him for killing the white man in his attempts to fight against foreign domination. Okonkwo thinks he is a victim of betrayal by his people and prefers to die. The irony is that while avoiding the shameful death by hanging in the hands of the white man, he dies a more shameful death. All the dignified life he lived has been drained down the gutter by his shameful death.

On the other hand, the modern European heroes have their source to be different in analysis. It is commonplace to refer to Miller's Proctor as an honest man, much like Joe Keller in "All my Sons" (1957). His honesty is basically to himself as well as to others and when he is not being honest he suffers accordingly. His guilty feelings, like Eddie Carbone and Joe Keller who emerge in the plays, "The Crucible" (1957b) are a painful predicament and directs their humanities.

For example, Joe Keller commits suicide because he cannot meet the standards of the ideal father and husband that his own son expects of him. In a similar vein, Eddie Carbone dies because he feels he has violated the rules of his society. All these pressures confront the European modern heroes and they fall victim to the subduing weights of society and family. Undoubtedly, it is in a trap set up by social and psychological forces.

The moral dilemma and a conflict found in the heroes' souls, their will-power to fight single-handedly against Theocratic State (like what Proctor did), and Joan, who also rebels against the state and the church out of religious fervency, their sense of unworthiness, are all tragic sources of the plays.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The study of the tragic conception clearly reveals that the whole tragic tradition from the time of the Greeks to the modern era, has undergone a metamorphosis. Writers and philosophers have sought to relate postulates of tragedy as a concept that explains and justifies the problems and the woes of life. Even though there have been changes over the centuries in the concepts of this tragic genre, its essence remains the same. In the diversity of the tragic conceptions, there is also continuity.

Tragedy as a tradition has been problematic in terms of definition because of the shift in the nature of the tragic hero. But it does not undermine the authentic posture of the tragic tradition. The fact that pain and suffering give pleasure is paradoxical. Nevertheless, this paradox is explained by the fact that this aesthetic experience is achieved through the beauty and excellence emanating from the work of art rather than by the subject matter. The denouement may not always bring satisfaction to the audience and readers, but it clearly generates a lively human sympathy.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century plays are molded in the use of myths to delineate at a deep level, the outcome of passion and the very nature of suffering. Beckett's, Shaw's and Miller's handling of their plot and structure as modern writers of the European concept is much unlike the African concept. There is an underlying cultural dimension in modern tragedy in that, the tragic hero or heroine is portrayed differently from one culture to another. This has implication for understanding the tragic hero in different cultural contexts.

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