

Arrogance as Evil in the Tragic Hero

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INTRODUCTION

Aristotle, considered by many to be the father of Western thought, believed and taught that conflict is necessary for growth, that without opposing viewpoints and influences in the lives of human beings, the mind and will stagnate. In all lives there are turning points when decisions and choices must be made, particularly in the lives of adolescents. Our students witness conflict every day – sometimes on a staggering scale as in the recent Columbine incident in Littleton, Colorado and the continuing antagonism and genocide in Bosnia that has been present for hundreds of years. Many may harbor a belief that conflict is all of reality. They must grow to realize that conflict is a motivator for change, not an end unto itself.

In youth, we will often fiercely follow one path or the other to discover what works or does not work to produce the conditions we seek. Some choices we make will take unplanned directions and unexpected diversions. We will blindly pursue this course of action for a few times, learn from trial and error (experience), and begin to progress by more carefully considering the consequences of the act. Would any of us have become what we are today as adults and educators without the value of trial and error? How many of us are doing what we envisioned and planned our lives to be as young adolescents? Probably very few.

Choices can bring razor sharp boundaries that fence us into a self-imposed space as well as free us to pursue the next stage of what we are to become. Through seemingly impossible choices and decisions we are required to make at times, we eventually learn to go within ourselves, temper our feelings, and make informed decisions based on past experience. We also learn from the successes and setbacks of our peers and the society in which we live. We learn to recognize good and evil, not by definition, but rather by how our experience of these concepts affects us in a given situation. We learn from pain the consequences of incorrect choices, and usually change our thinking and actions when presented with a similar choice a second time.

Vengeance and ill will permeate our environment at every turn. It is so very convenient to become victim and then perpetrator, again and yet again, ever changing roles. Evil is a malevolent force, maybe soft yet constant, cunning and powerful, or deadly brutal, but always hypnotic, seductive and addicting.

Objectives

For our purposes, let us loosely define catharsis as a personal emotional identification with the protagonist or antagonist of a story. This identification promises us an inside glimpse into what motivates characters within the framework of their social mores and cultures. We observe from a safe place – the outsider looking in – and most often, we see pieces of our lives printed or filmed

under an alias. The most basic needs and desires of people do not change over time, just the setting and the costumes. The works for this unit reflect and address our most essential needs and conflicts in human relationships, society, and our search for a more secure perspective of our place in the world in the presence of good – and evil.

Method

This unit is designed to be taught in a high school English curriculum in segments of two-week intervals over six weeks, staggered throughout the school year. Three major works, appropriate to high school students in grades 10 through 12, are selected to be taught in sequence. Beginning with Greek tragedy and introducing the Greek tragic hero, this unit is to define the basis and need for these figures in society then as well as now. Tragic heroes, being elevated from humanity, have lost touch with much of their mortality and believe themselves to be above universal and man-made laws. This arrogance illustrates the evil, borne out of self, will run riot and the price the hero pays for squelching all opposition to himself. When the hero loses control, so goes rationality.

Objectives for the student are to:

1. Connect literature in historical, current, and personal aspects.
2. Identify and expand the concept of evil or *dread* into the classical Greek model of the tragic hero. [*dread* – Alford's definition includes being vulnerable, alone, or mortal]
3. Realize the eternal nature of the tragic hero by identifying comparisons, contrasts, and evil or *dread* present in the profiles of three tragic heroes from three distinct periods of literature or contemporary films.
4. Project the fate of the tragic hero through a predictable pattern of behavior.
5. Experience catharsis and explain or understand how a story or play might aim at this.
6. Possibly alter the fate of the tragic hero by rerouting the negative energy of the tragic flaw, give *dread* (the acting out of evil due to powerlessness) another place...in the future.

DISCUSSING THE TRAGIC HERO: HIS DREAD, HIS EVIL, AND HIS FLAW

The tragic hero's flaw, arrogance as evil, is referred to by Alford as having its origins in the dread of living the human experience (Alford, *What Evil Means to Us*, ch. 3). Certainly people of such high station in life with their "heads in the clouds" can easily lose grasp of their human nature by having disassociated from the mainstream civilian – the ordinary man below his station.

But 'tis a common proof
That lowliness is young ambition's ladder,
Whereto the climber-upward turns his face.
But when he once attains the utmost round,
He then unto the ladder turns his back,
Looks in the clouds, scorning the base degrees
By which he did ascend. So Caesar may.

(*Julius Caesar*, 2.1.21-27)

Alford also states that being human involves vulnerability, error, and eventually death.

Tragic heroes are godlike and are often worshipped by other mortals. They may even believe themselves to be divinely blessed. They are, nonetheless, human beings that make mortal mistakes. Heroes possess no supernatural power or divine protection. The tragic hero's particular evil is an arrogance that manifests itself in his attempt at play-acting what he believes to be the human experience, but from a "lofty" place. He is more accustomed to controlling another's experience rather than living his own. Shouldn't he be above the ordinary squalor of human existence and suffering? The answer is yes; he is an extraordinary and removed being, but still human. He will suffer as a super-human, extraordinarily and exquisitely.

His flaw stems from his hubris – his excessive pride in his exalted place. As we note later in our definition of the tragic hero, he enjoys a position in society marked by birth or achievement. If he has attained his rank by achievement, he has even more of a duty and responsibility to the will of the people – the public that has ennobled and placed him in power. Often, the hero's word is law, and his behavior beyond reproach. How lowly he must feel for our noble one to encounter mortal opposition to his manner of thinking and doing. He is reminded of where he came from, how he got there, and how human he is.

Being human involves being vulnerable and, in a sense, fragile like other mortals. When he is opposed and in fear of losing the privilege of power and control, he is, in a sense, in fear of losing his very self-identity and of being nothing and alone in the universe (*What Evil Means to Us*, ch. 3). "Power tends to corrupt: absolute power corrupts absolutely" (*Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 335). The evil that is borne of this fear of loss of power, this dread of being ordinary propels the desperate measures that our hero is required to make in order to maintain his control of the status quo, at any expense.

We, the spectators, powerlessly watch our gallant lose the valuable ground of ethics. We witness the increasing baseness and diminishing credibility of his deeds as his efforts to control the status quo become more degenerate. Not believing himself capable of error, he continues to blaze his trail to doom despite omens, oracles, soothsayers and all manner of unnatural phenomena that befalls his path. (We will examine in detail the exact nature of evil in connection to heroes in the three works of literature from three distinct periods.) He is often cavalier as he rides toward his end. How sad, predictable, and tragic that in his psychological isolation he ceases to hear the voices of the mass and humanity that created him. He heeds nor hears no counsel but his own.

As he approaches death, or a far worse state of tortured existence in desolation and isolation, death may appear to be the preferable alternative.

Creon: Oh pity!
All true, all true, and more than I can bear!
Oh, my wife, my son! ...
O God, I am sick with fear.
Are there no swords Here?
Has no one a blow for me?

(*Antigone*, Exodos)

Ironically, all of the hero's efforts at avoiding getting his hands dirty with the drama of being human have landed him in the very muck and mire of it. He is finally experiencing life on life's terms – powerlessness and vulnerability at the mercy of a higher order. His words and deeds mean nothing now.

Creon: Whatever my hands have touched has come to nothing.
Fate has brought all my pride to a thought of dust.

(*Antigone*, Exodos)

We need the tragic hero and his flaw that magnifies his very nobility. He is our caveat; our warning not to scorn the will of God or the hearts of those close to us. We are reminded through his enormous suffering that all of life is a sequential process, learned and built step by step, and that to attempt to circumvent or avoid the discomfort or inconvenience of feeling is to arrest and pervert the natural flow of the order of life into something inhumane and uncompassionate. The hero is disconnected from life.

Lastly, the tragic hero never questions his decisions until it is too late. The evil lives in exercising his self-will above all else for fear of losing image. Okonkwo, Chinua Achebe's tragic hero in *Things Fall Apart*, is a perfect example of man at bay with feelings.

As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his machete, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry "My father, they have killed me!" as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak.

(Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 61)

The lesson is for us, the reader and spectator. We are urged to make informed choices, to heed the great failings of the tragic heroes by checking our motives, as evil seems to be a direct result of being self-obsessed with no regard for the fallout of our actions upon others. We need our tragic hero to show us again and yet again how fragile our bodies and emotions are, yet how indomitable our spirits are.

Definition and Characteristics of Tragic Heroes and Why They Are Arrogant

The tragic hero:

1. Enjoys an exalted position in society either by birth or extraordinary achievements.
2. Demonstrates wisdom, moral or philosophical greatness – sometimes physical prowess.
3. Adheres to and exemplifies a code of conduct including reverence toward the laws of God and the universe, loyalty to the family, and respect for government.
4. Possesses a flaw in personality or psyche that ultimately brings about total destruction.

***ANTIGONE* [480 B.C.]**

“The Bad Seed”

Of the tragic figures in *Antigone*, Creon is the most obviously evil because his motives are self-serving and his fate, the worst. As the play begins, we learn that Antigone has defied Creon's royal decree by performing sacred burial rites for her exiled brother, Polyneices. Polyneices has been declared an enemy of the state by Creon. The sentence for anyone attempting to bury him is death by stoning.

Creon has become King of Thebes by default, as a result of Oedipus' fate as previously predicted by the Oracle at Delphi: Oedipus murders his father and unknowingly marries his mother. Jocaste, his mother and wife and Creon's sister, commits suicide upon learning the truth. Between Oedipus' two sons, Creon sides with Eteocles in his claim for Oedipus' throne and exiles Polyneices. Polyneices, in exile, raises an army against Thebes, attempting to seize the throne for himself. The two brothers fight and slay one another. Eteocles is awarded an honorable burial by Creon for bravely defending the city, but Polyneices is denied any burial because of his act of treason. Denial of a ritual burial was damning and nearly sacrilegious to the ancient Greeks.

Creon is enraged to discover his decree has been disobeyed. When he learns it is Antigone, his niece, he asks her if she has heard the decree. She says yes, that the decree was declared publicly and openly – she answers that she understands the consequences. Creon further asks Antigone if she is blatantly defying him. She replies that she is answering and obeying a higher law. Creon condemns her, and in doing so violates the unspoken law of loyalty to the family. Creon's will be done!

Creon: Do you want me to show myself weak before the people?
Or to break my sworn word? No, and I will not.
The woman dies.
I suppose she'll plead "family ties." Well, let her.
If I permit my own family to rebel,
How shall I earn the world's obedience?

(*Antigone*, 3.26-31)

Beginning with the messenger, who brings news of Polyneice's burial, Creon repeatedly accuses everyone, including his advisors, the Chorus, and Teiresias of accepting bribes. These paranoid and constant accusations raise questions concerning Creon's motives.

Creon: No, from the very beginning
There have been those who have whispered together,
Stiff-necked anarchists, putting their heads together,
Scheming against me in alleys. These are the men,
And they have bribed my own guard to do this thing.
Money!
There's nothing in the world so demoralizing as money.
(*Antigone*, 1.102-108)

Has Creon deliberately created the conflict between the brothers by siding with one and exiling the other? Is it not better for Creon if the sons of Oedipus fight each other rather than him for the throne? Has Creon usurped the throne by planning their conflict and deaths? This is evil and premeditated murder. We also learn later in the play that Creon has had previous knowledge of Oedipus' fate before Oedipus knew it himself. Teiresias confronts Creon.

Creon: I admit my debt to you. But what have you to say?
Teiresias: This Creon: You stand once more on the edge of fate.
Creon: What do you mean? Your words are a kind of dread.
(*Antigone*, 5.7-9)

[They sputter and spar.]

Creon: The generation of prophets has always loved gold.
Teiresias: The generation of kings has always loved brass.
Creon: You forget yourself! You're speaking to your king.
Teiresias: I know it. You are king because of me.
(*Antigone*, 5.61-64)

By condemning Antigone, Creon is alienating his son and his public. He will ultimately be responsible for the deaths of both his son Haimon and his wife Eurydice as a result of his self-will. He does not consider the fallout of his actions. He is deaf to all counsel. The following dialogue is from Scene 3.

Haimon: Your temper terrifies them – everyone
Will tell you only what you like to hear.
But I, at any rate, can listen: and I have heard them
Muttering and whispering in the dark about this girl.
They say no woman has ever, so unreasonably,
Died so shameful a death for a generous act...
(59-64)

Creon: (completely out of control) Fool, adolescent fool!
Taken in by a woman!
Haimon: You'll never see me taken in by anything vile.
Creon: Every word you say is for her!
Haimon: (quietly, darkly) And for you. And for me.
And for the gods under earth.
Creon: You'll never marry her while she lives.
Haimon: Then she must die – But her death will cause another.
(112-119)

Eurydice kills herself upon learning of Haimon's suicide after he finds Antigone dead in her vault of stone.

We cannot exit the play without a brief examination of the tragic female hero – Antigone. I do not hold her as the primary example of arrogance as evil because her motive is clean and her action pure. By burying her brother Polyneices, she is obeying the law of heaven and showing loyalty to the family. She is further victimized because she is a woman and spoken of by Creon as a less than equal being.

Creon: Your pleasure with her would soon grow cold, Haimon,
And then you'd have a hellcat in bed and elsewhere.
Let her find her husband in hell!
Of all the people in this city, only she
Has had contempt for my law and broken it.
(*Antigone*, 5.21-25)

Antigone's rank is royal by birth. She is one of Oedipus' daughters, and thus carries the curse of the house of Oedipus. Antigone, like Creon, suffers from excessive pride, hubris; her blatant challenge of Creon's civil authority forces him to sentence her according to Greek law. We can say that her arrogance results in a chain reaction causing the untimely deaths of three people – herself, Haimon, and Eurydice. Antigone cuts a haughty figure for us as she disdains Creon and the Chorus on her way to death. Antigone's attitude is almost a self-sentencing guilt and bravado aimed at the seed of incest she carries. Perhaps she is punishing herself. Perhaps she is ending the curse for future generations with her death.

Chorus: You has passed beyond human daring and come at last
Into a place of stone where justice sits.
I cannot tell
What shape your father's guilt appears in this.

Antigone: You have touched it at last: the bridal bed
Unspeakable, horror of son and mother mingling:
Their crime, infection of all our family!
Your marriage strikes from the grace to murder mine.
I have been a stranger here in my own land:
All my life
The blasphemy of my birth has followed me.
(*Antigone*, 4.33-44)

Perhaps this self-sentencing is her noble moral cause, or the very extreme of evil indulgence in self-pity and stupidity; self absorption at the eminent loss of human life, including her own. Maybe she's just spoiled and stubborn.

Strategies and Objectives

Any well-taught unit on Greek tragedy would stress the structure, the function of tragedy in Greek society (to teach), and a working definition of the tragic hero that is universal enough to withstand the conventions of any genre or subsequent period of literature where this figure appears. Our focus is the tragic hero, his dread, and his behavior surrounding his flaw, and, in this case, the resulting fallout of his self-will. We are also to stress the continued influence of Greek thought in Western art, literature, philosophy, and politics today. Teaching any literature that is written in verse, I use a cassette recording for the first reading, (Caedmon Audio) if available. Upon closer reading and clarification of the text, students tend to be less intimidated after heard the inflection, pronunciation, and tone of the language of the piece. The characters in *Antigone* have become people with emotions and not words to stumble through. A video or film clip on the Greek tragic vision is also helpful as a preliminary strategy along with the background on the curse of Oedipus. I have listed these sources in the Bibliography.

The following activity would be used as a post-unit wrap. The student will draw inferences and make deductions supported by evidence from the text to foster critical thinking skills. Catharsis, or the purging of emotion (*Aristotle*, 230), is the goal of this activity to determine how the reader feels about each of the heroes, and how disaster could possibly be avoided. Responses will vary and, please remember, I am not attempting to rewrite *Antigone* but elicit genuine responses from my students.

WRAP ACTIVITY FOR *ANTIGONE*

Objective: Critical thinking skills, drawing conclusions and making inferences based on textual evidence.

Strategy: Interview, therapy session, mediation, character analysis.

HOW DO I COUNSEL THEM?

You are a therapist/counselor at the Crisis Intervention Center in the ancient city of Thebes. Your specialty is family counseling. You have been summoned to the royal palace by the Choragos to mediate in a volatile argument between the king, Creon, and his niece, Antigone. Antigone has broken Creon's law. What approach will you use? You are attempting to avert tragedy and evil consequences.

CONSIDER:

- Emotions are running high because of the recent conflict and the deaths of the two brothers.
- This is not only a family quarrel, but also possibly a highly visible one that could go public
 - they are royals.
- The past behavior of each person and what you have heard up until after Ode 3.

CASE 1—Creon: King of Thebes, maker and enforcer of civil law, Haimon's father, uncle of Antigone. "My niece has broken my law and buried her brother Polyneices, who has committed treason against the state. How dare she! She is also Haimon's fiancé. My sentence for this defiance is death. Antigone is young, impulsive and strong-willed, but how can I turn a blind eye; without the laws of men, there is no civilization. It makes me boil..."

CASE 2—Antigone: Lawbreaker, Creon's niece, Haimon's fiancé, sister of Polyneices, a royal princess. "I had no choice. Not burying my brother would bring more shame to my family's memory. I know I broke Creon's law, but I am obeying the law of God and loyalty to my family. Can anyone on earth say that what I did was wrong? Oh, I feel like something terrible is going to happen."

CASE 3—Haimon: Fiancé of Antigone, son of Creon, a reasonable, upstanding young man. "What's going on? Father is threatening Antigone. I hear that Antigone insulted and defied him in public. It's true she broke the law, but the people praise her courage and reverence for the dead. Surely father wouldn't harm my fiancé...they're shouting. What can I do?"

JULIUS CAESAR

"Big Boys Don't Cry"

Brutus, the "noblest Roman of them all" (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 5.5.68) is the only innocent conspirator, according to Marcus Antonius. This tragedy presents the epitome of the green-eyed monster named jealousy, along with envy, greed, and avarice. It is a true story based on Plutarch's *Life of Julius Caesar*. Several of the major players are struck by jealousy and greed – certainly Cassius, who begins this evil conspiracy to assassinate Caesar out of personal jealousy, but needs Brutus' credibility to make it happen. We eventually see Mark Antony gloat in his new-found influence and power over the mass of citizenry when he pronounces their interest in Caesar's will.

All: Most true; the will:—Let's stay and hear the will.
Antony: Here is the will, and under Caesar's seal.
To every Roman citizen he gives,
To every several man, seventy-five drachmas.
Second Citizen: Most noble Caesar! We'll revenge his death.
(*Julius Caesar*, 3.2.244-48)

When the play opens, Rome is enjoying a time of peace and prosperity after several years of civil war. Caesar has returned, victorious over Pompey, and the treasury is full. Some noble Romans fear Caesar's great power may turn him into a tyrannical dictator. Some are jealous of him.

Cassius: Why, man, doth he bstride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs and peep about
To find ourselves dishonorable graves.
Men at some time are masters of their fates.
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars
But in ourselves that we are underlings.
(*Julius Caesar*, 1.2.135-140)

Caesar is without a doubt the most powerful man in the known world. He is a military genius, and people believe him to be blessed by the gods because of his epileptic condition, the "falling sickness" (*Julius Caesar*, 1.2.244). Was Caesar ambitious? Probably! He refers to himself in the royal "We," and he seems quite taken with his own invincibility even after the augurs failed to find a heart in the beast in his quandary whether to go to the Senate, or stay at home as Calpurnia wishes.

Caesar: The gods do this in shame of cowardice.
Caesar should be a beast without a heart
If he should stay at home today for fear.

No, Caesar shall not. Danger knows full well
That Caesar is more dangerous than he,
We are two lions littered in one day,
And I the elder and more terrible.
And Caesar shall go forth.

Calpurnia: Alas, my lord,
Your wisdom is consumed in confidence.
(*Julius Caesar*, 2.2.41-51)

It appears everybody wants something for themselves except Brutus. He believes himself to be a descendant of Lucius Junius Brutus that drove out the last of the emperors of Rome and instituted a republic. Brutus is a praetor by Caesar's hand, a high ranking judge and official in the Senate. Brutus is by creed a Stoic. Big boys don't cry (or big girls either).

Portia: Tell me your counsels, I will not disclose 'em.
I have made strong proof of my constancy,
Giving myself a voluntary wound
Here in my thigh. Can I bear that with patience
And not my husband's secrets?
(*Julius Caesar*, 2.1.298-302)

Stoics live lives of rationalism, reason, and responsibility, never submitting to emotional or physical pain. Duty is first. They (in Brutus' case) are the strong, silent types that take their own counsel [too] seriously and don't listen to those closest to their own hearts. Portia knows Brutus is not ill as he pleads that the reason for his peculiar behavior. "You have some sick offense within your mind" (2.1.268). This internal conflict is the very weakness used by Cassius to convert Brutus to the conspiracy "than that poor Brutus with himself at war, forgets the shows of love to other men" (1.2.45-46). He sees only duty as the descendant of a noble Roman and the ideals of his creed. Brutus is not exactly a brainy guy. The conspirators have no plan of action after they kill Caesar. They have not even sworn a pact of allegiance. They don't kill Antony, Caesar's right hand man, but rather let him speak at Caesar's funeral with Brutus' permission! Earlier, he is easily taken in by haphazard notes thrown into his window (Act 2, scene 1) without proof, and makes some poor military decisions (Act 5). Brutus hides in the ideals of Stoicism and this desensitizes him from the everyday workings of life like getting your hands dirty to raise money to pay your troops (4.3.65-80), or even grieving the death of your wife – something for which Brutus is directly responsible. Portia, in Brutus' absence, has grown "distracted" and "swallowed fire." Brutus is the great rationalizer. His arrogance has become evil through his blind devotion to Stoicism. He literally "dreads" dealing with the realities of being human and prefers suicide to capture. The very order he was trying to preserve in Rome is destroyed with the assassination of Caesar. During a lucid moment prior to Caesar's assassination, Brutus makes an analogy of man as a microcosm and the fallout of his will on the macrocosm of society, correspondent to the beginning of his own degeneration. (*The Elizabethan World Picture*, 91-94)

Brutus: Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma or a hideous dream.
The Genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council, and the state of man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection.

(Julius Caesar, 2.1.65-71)

By the end of the play, civil strife is rampant, many noble Romans are dead, and armies fight and die in battle. Even Caesar's ghost appears to Brutus.

Strategies and Objectives

As in teaching *Antigone*, the structure and conventions of Elizabethan tragedy would be stressed along with our universal definition of the tragic hero. Again, I would use a cassette tape for the first reading. *Julius Caesar* is a series of persuasive speeches in unrhymed iambic pentameter, divided by bits of dialogue. An interesting wrap activity for *Julius Caesar* might be persuasive in nature. A proposal follows.

WRAP ACTIVITY FOR *JULIUS CAESAR*

Objective: Critical writing skills, targeting a specific audience, convincing your reader with textual evidence.

Strategy: Persuasive essay.

Prompt: Julius Caesar, the most powerful military leader in the known world, is returning to Rome after yet another victory bringing with him peace and prosperity. Many Romans feel he should be made Emperor. Other Romans remember the tyranny of kings past and fear one man having absolute power. State your position and give three convincing reasons for your decision. Your audience is the Roman Senate or the citizens of Rome. Five paragraphs please.

State your position:

Reason 1

Reason 2

Reason 3

Restate your position:

THINGS FALL APART

"Respect"

This novel is the definitive tragic model about the dissolution of the African Ibo culture by Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe. Okonkwo, a great and heroic leader, is doomed by his inflexibility and hubris. He is driven by fear of failure.

He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father. Unoka, for that was his father's name, had died ten years ago. In his day he was lazy and improvident, and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow.
(Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 4)

The reader gets a rare and exotic understanding of a totally foreign and ancient culture experiencing the growing pains of colonial expansion during the British domination of Nigeria in the late 1800s.

Okonkwo's ferocity is demonstrated in the carrying out of his personal "dread" to the letter within his family, his community, and the invaders. His ferocity, born of fear, is his evil. During the Week of Peace, one of Okonkwo's wives, Ojiugo, has left the compound, ignoring her children and domestic duties, to "plait her hair."

And when she returned, he beat her very heavily. In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week. But Okonkwo was not a man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess. (Achebe, 29-30)

Being unable to bend, he loses self-control and eventually all he has once stood for. The novel examples rites, initiations, and tribal customs whose images can be disturbing to Western mentality, but also stresses the parallels and needs in all cultures to have such ceremonies acknowledging important events in the passing of their lives. The novel uses compact language, often in parable form. The vocabulary is unique and must be defined by an adequate glossary provided at the end of the text. This is a story of rage and fear mixed with cutting-edge wisdom, self-introspection, and self-destruction. After the death of his adopted son Ikemefuna, his biological son Nwoye has taken the way of the invader's religion, abandoning his tribe.

Okonkwo was popularly called the "Roaring Flame." As he looked into the log fire he recalled the name. He was a flaming fire. How then could he have begotten a son like Nwoye, degenerate and effeminate? His wife had played him false. He would teach her! But Nwoye resembled his grandfather, Unoka, who was Okonkwo's father. He pushed the thought out of his mind. He, Okonkwo, was called a flaming fire...At Nwoye's age Okonkwo had already become famous

throughout Umofia for his wrestling and his fearlessness. He signed heavily, and as if in sympathy the smoldering log also sighed. And immediately Okonkwo's eyes were opened and he saw the whole matter clearly. Living fire begets cold, impotent ash. He sighed again, deeply. (Achebe, 153)

Okonkwo's personal and social chi, or karma, is good because he works, provides for his family, and serves his community. Okonkwo is forewarned by one of the elders, Ezeudu. His spiritual chi begins to degenerate with the murder of Ikemfuna (Achebe, 4). "That boy calls you father," he had said. "Bear no hand in his death" (Achebe, 121). This is after offending Ani, the earth goddess, for beating his wife during the Week of Peace. He is then exiled to his motherland for accidentally killing a tribesman's son while firing a gun, celebrating Ezeudu's funeral. As Okonkwo and his family flee, his compound is destroyed along with his barn, and his animals are killed.

Okonkwo returns to Umofia after seven years in exile to a much different society; titles he would have earned by now belong to other men, and the invader has brought a government, money, and missionaries that have well-established themselves into power.

"What do you want here?"

"The white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop." 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)

Okonkwo has no other choice but to kill himself. This is not a world he knows or of which can be a part. The most evil twist comes at the end of the novel, and the reader forgets the brutality of Ibo custom and the wrong of Okonkwo – killing a person he loved for fear of being thought weak. The thoughts of the District Commissioner:

In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things...As he walked back to the court he thought about that book...The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate ... He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes On The Lower Niger*. (Achebe, 208-209)

Achebe suggests that colonialism has led to this entire tragedy, but the seeds of dread and self-will are obvious in Okonkwo. He is not a survivor. Our goal is to survive; and to teach and study that. In our journey through this life of good and evil influences, we purposefully choose our own end by the choices we make along the way. Success can be defined as the acceptance of all of our experience that has led us where we are today. Acceptance of ourselves is the key to acceptance and tolerance of others.

Strategies and Objectives

Having taught the mechanics of *Things Fall Apart* as a classic tragedy with a tragic hero, I chose the poem "Journey" by Nikki Giovanni as a summative activity for this unit. *Things Fall Apart* is full of parables; idioms and sing-song sayings that provoke further response from the reader. "Journey" is an open-ended, positive poem about the surviving and living of life on life's terms. Using "Journey" as a writing catalyst, students will generate poetry, writing cooperatively and independently using imagery (sensory perception), similes, metaphors, and definition of specific vocabulary (see the following activity).

My life is like a _____. (simile)
I (see, hear, smell, taste, feel) _____. (imagery)
Interrogatives (who, what, when, where, why, and how) can also be useful.

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READINGS FOR TEACHERS

Brackett, Oscar G. "Theatre and Drama in Ancient Greece" in *History of the Theatre*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Incorporated, 1982.
This volume contains complete descriptions and diagrams of Greek theater in the fifth century, B.C.

Bullfinch, Thomas. "The Sphinx" in *Bullfinch's Mythology*. New York: Avenel Books, 1978. This article tells the story of Oedipus' rise to the throne of Thebes.

Hamilton, Edith. "Cicero's Rome: The Republic" and "Caesar and Cicero" in *The Roman Way*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1932.
Hamilton places the reader in Caesar's every day social and political Rome.

Moyers, Bill. "Chinua Achebe," "Martha Nussbaum." *A World of Ideas*. New York: Doubleday, 1989.
Both writer Achebe and philosopher Nussbaum speak of living with their craft, about being committed equally, personally, and professionally.

Nussbaum, Martha. "Sophocles' *Antigone*: Conflict, Vision, and Simplification" in *The Fragility of Goodness*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
Nussbaum elaborates on her view of the Greek tragic vision and women.

"Stoicism" in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., Vol. 17. Chicago: Helen Hemingway Benton, Publisher, 1974.
This article traces the evolution and practice of Stoicism from ancient times.

Tillyard, E.M.W. "The Correspondences" in *The Elizabethan World Picture*. New York: Vintage Books, 1972.

Tillyard's volume explores the order of the Elizabethan world from the heavens to intricate personalty traits.

ADDITIONAL CLASSROOM ENRICHMENT MATERIALS

Bolt, Robert, screenwriter. *The Mission*. Dir. Roland Joffe. Dist. Warner Communications, 1986.

A priest and a mercenary join forces to protect the natives against the evils of colonization in South America – based on a true story. This film parallels the African experience of the 1880s.

Davidson, Basis. Program 5: "The Bible and The Gun." Program 6: "This Magnificent African

Cake" in *Africa: The Story of a Continent*. Dir. Basil Davidson. Distr. R W Arts, 1984. One film in a series of programs documenting colonization and exploitation of British Africa, and useful for understanding Achebe's point of view.

Greece: A Moment of Excellence. Narr. by Sam Waterston. Distr. Time Life Video and Television, 1995.

This is an excellent survey film of Greek customs, spirituality, sports, and political life.

Muncaster, Martin. *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare*. Distr. Center for the Humanities, 1982.

Social, political, military, language, and industry in Elizabethan England are the topics of this documentary.

Mythology Lives! Ancient Stories in Modern Literature. Distr. Center for the Humanities, 1982.

This is a film relating ancient themes present in current and classical literature.

Shakespeare: A Day at the Globe. Distr. Guidance Associates Video, 1977.

This is a working documentary on the history of the Globe and its influence on English life in the Elizabethan Age.

Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. Caedmon Audio, Dir. Howard Sackler. Distr. Harper Collins Publishers, 1995.

This is an essential resource in mastering the language of Shakespeare. Persuasive and phrased for student understanding.

Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. Dir. Joseph Mankiewicz. Distr. MGM 1953.

This is the classic black and white version with Gielgud and Brando.

Sophocles. *Antigone*. Caedmon Audio, Trans. by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, Dir.

Howard Sackler. Distr. Harper Collins Publishers, 1996.

This is an excellent emotionally charged reader's theater type production.

Sophocles. *Antigone*. Trans. and Dir. by Don Taylor, BBC. Distr. Films for the Humanities, 1984.
This is a semi-modern adaptation of the classic. Creon is presented as a dictator-autocrat.
All the tragic elements are present.

POST UNIT ACTIVITY FOR SELF-EVALUATION

Objective: Vocabulary in context, implied main idea, projection.

Strategy: Cooperative and independent poetry composition, interpretation.

"Journey" by Nikki Giovanni

Recorder: _____

Observer: _____

Spokesperson: _____

Reader: _____

I. Prereading: Before reading the poem, answer the following questions. Be sure to discuss all questions thoroughly as a group before answering.

1. All journeys come to an end where they began. TRUE FALSE
2. Everyone must always try to do his/her best. TRUE FALSE
3. All people want the same things from life. TRUE FALSE
4. Everyone has control over his/her life. TRUE FALSE

II. Read and Respond: Read the poem "Journey" by Nikki Giovanni and answer the following questions.

1. What does the word **exuberant** mean?
2. What does the Journey refer to?
3. What is an **endeavor**?
4. When Giovanni writes about the fellow passenger, what is she talking about?
5. How does this person feel about going on this journey?

III. Individual response. **EACH** member of the group should include a copy of the poem written in class in response to the poem "Journey" using "Journey" as a model.

- ◆ Follow the directions given in class.
- ◆ Write and revise poem.
- ◆ Staple all poems to the back of this sheet and turn them in.