

Okonkwo's Representation of Character

The issue of character is established early in *Things Fall Apart* and informs the most questionable of Okonkwo's actions throughout the novel. Although character is often considered strong only if there is a development or major change in that character, as in a character arc, over the course of a novel's major conflicts, Rorty would dismiss this perspective. For her, true characters maintain a few qualities, nourish them to excess until they dominate and dictate all others...A person of character is neither bribed nor corrupted; he stands fast, is steadfast" (540). With Okonkwo as example, the legitimacy of this character philosophy is indisputable.

Rorty argues that characters "are their individual powers and dispositions," (539) key here being the term *dispositions* which is taken to mean "the tendency of something to act in a certain manner under given circumstances" and which establishes character as a hard-wired trait or set of traits upon which all actions are based. In relation to a person-as-character, disposition-as-character then becomes the primary tool in determining the behavioral patterns of the person. What Rorty means to establish by this is that characters are defined explicitly by these dispositions. If these dispositions fluctuate, the character is lost because the person depends upon the stability of its dispositions in order to remain a character.

A causal relationship between story events and a person's character surely exists, but "[Characters'] natures form from their responses to experiences, rather than being formed by them" (Rorty 539). The response is the external manifestation of the internal disposition. A character who is predisposed to hate children, for example, would not have high regard for children of their own, regardless how well-behaved, respected, or prosperous those children were. We see this at work with Okonkwo. Achebe acknowledges that Okonkwo does not have a malicious heart but that "his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness...It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father" (Achebe 13). This is the most innermost and central element of Okonkwo's

outward expressions. His disposition, then, demands that he combats failure and weakness. When these things emerge, if he is indeed a character, he should always be working against them. Considering Okonkwo's esteem of wrestling and displays of strength as the antagonists of his fears, it hardly seems strange that his reactions to what he perceives as weakness would manifest as beatings. So while his actions seem extreme, they perfectly align with expectations of how he, as a character, would and should behave.

This fearful paranoia that weakness has infected his family drives each of Okonkwo's interactions with them. But the narrator offers a hint of the invalidity of this paranoia. There are indeed "disquieting signs of laziness which he thought he already saw in them," (Achebe 33) but the critical truth of the matter is that these signs are only *thought* to exist; as mentioned earlier, he only *perceives* weakness, but that weakness cannot be confirmed as an absolute truth. If Okonkwo's primary disposition is to fight against laziness and imperfection (both of which I'll refer to singularly as weakness), he has no incentive to make distinctions between actual and perceived weakness because his perceptions will also be colored over by his disposition. This colored perception drives him to see fault where there might be none, and fear drives him to remedy those faults.

This identification of Okonkwo as a character stands incomplete, though, without assessing its indelibility. Why not, in the face of resistance, does Okonkwo refuse to alter his behavior? That, too, involves the nature of character which "are, by nature, defined and delineated. If they change, it is because it is in their character to do so under specific circumstances" (Rorty 539). It seems all too easy to conclude that those specific circumstances failed to occur—two instances where it might have are when he beat his wife during the week of peace and when he joined in the slaughter of Ikemefuna—but that is exactly the nature of character, that a character cannot change unless that change is driven or recommended by their disposition. As he saw weakness in both his wife and Ikemefuna, his disposition would not lead him to seek a change in character.

Even within his own sociocultural group, Okonkwo stands out as a seeming outlier. He is the hardest worker, harshest husband, and strictest father. Achebe writes him in the vein of character rather than a figure or hero or any of the multiple representations of a person Rorty outlines. While Rorty and Achebe may not have ever been in direct conversation with one another, it's evident how necessary the development of Okonkwo in the vein of character is to the story, primarily in its second and third parts. It depends on him being set apart psychologically to even consider fomenting rebellion against the white missionaries. In this, *Things Fall Apart* both provides an example of Rorty's character at work and executes it in such a way that an argument for its utility in literature can be structured.

Works Cited

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