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Why do Things Fall Apart?
A Psychological Analysis of Okonkwo's
Personality and his Ultimate Demise in Chinua
Achebe's Novel Things Fall Apart.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Respected as one of the founders of the modern Nigerian literary movement, Chinua Achebe born the child of a protestant missionary later rejected his Christian name, Albert, in place for his indigenous one, Chinua. Publishing his novel *Things Fall Apart* in 1959, Achebe sought to convey his own unique understanding of “Africanness” (Ogbaa 3). Opposed to past postcolonial representations of Africa as ‘exotic’ and the immoral ‘Other’, Achebe sought to convey a fuller understanding of the indigenous Ibo people. Subsequently, he sought to give voice to an otherwise underrepresented and exploited colonial subject and challenge the notion of Africa as a vacuum, prior to the coming of Europe (Ogbaa 16). Set in the 1880’s, Achebe’s novel portrays the clash between the British colonial government and the traditional culture of the indigenous Ibo people. More importantly for this essay the novel depicts the rise and fall of the protagonist Okonkwo, a wealthy and respected warrior of the Umuofia clan. Educated in Ibada, one of several universities implemented by the British colonial government, Achebe was afforded a unique insight into European and African perspectives of colonialism. Tired of the primitive European perception of ‘other’ cultures portrayed within the Western literary canon, Achebe sought to capture the African voice. His choice of language and decision to respond to earlier European accounts of Africa was thus political (Okpewho 7).

There are very few works not associated with the Western canon to have received as much attention as Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* (Ogbaa 1). Subsequently, a vast number of scholarly texts surrounding the many different themes included within Achebe’s novel have been written. However, contrary to the many post-colonial interpretations of this novel, this essay will employ a psychoanalytical literary approach to discuss the cause of the protagonist’s eventual demise, based on the premise that human behaviour is driven by an unconscious process. Consequently, this essay will argue that following the ego’s inability to repress the infantile demands of the unconscious, the preconscious and the conscious self, ever more compulsive, repetitive and neurotic behaviours are displayed. Subsequently, the

protagonist's self-confidence turns to pride and his masculinity develops into totalitarian rule leading to uncontrollable rage, Okonkwo's world literally falls apart. It should be noted that for the purpose of this essay, I will limit my discussion to Freud's theory of the *unconscious* in my interpretation of the protagonist Okonkwo. Finally, it is my understanding that Okonkwo's relationship to his mother plays a significant role in explaining the tense relationship with his own father and sons. The analysis of this unique relationship will thus afford a more inclusive understanding of what I presume to be the protagonist's repressed true emotions.

"Psychoanalytical criticism is a form of literary criticism which uses some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature" (Barry 96). Psychoanalytic theory partly consists of Freudian theories relating the mind, our instincts and sexuality and is based on the premise that human behaviour is driven by an unconscious process. This analysis will focus upon Freudian theories relating the interaction between what Freud himself termed the id, the ego, the superego and the unconscious. Furthermore, this essay will also utilise Anna Freud's theories relating human behaviour and defence mechanisms in order to better interpret some of the protagonist's unruly actions. The principal defence mechanisms identified by Freud and later refined by his daughter Anna, include *repression*, *displacement*, *regression*, *projection*, *introjection* and *sublimation*. However, although the use of defence mechanisms may be viewed as a universal phenomenon among a wide variety of individuals, "When carried to an extreme they lead to compulsive, repetitive and neurotic behaviour (Feist, Feist 34), which the protagonist, it will be argued, succumbs to all of the above.

Due to the fact that we know very little relating to the protagonist's own childhood and considering that the ego "the only region of the mind in contact with reality (Feist, Feist 29), is to some extent the product of our social surroundings, it is relevant to include a summary of the plot and background information of the culture to which the protagonist was exposed. This will not only facilitate a better understanding of the protagonist as a whole, but will help

to explain why Okonkwo fears the 'unmanly' reflection of his father, a man in conflict with the socially constructed masculine norms common to Ibo cultural traditions.

2. PLOT SUMMARY

Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* depicts the rise and tragic fall of a wealthy and respected warrior named Okonkwo. Dissimilar to early postcolonial primordial perceptions of Africa, the Ibo clan is culturally rich in tribal tradition and practices the worship of gods, communal living, war and magic. Leadership is based on an individual's personal worth, masculinity and contribution to the good of the Ibo tribe. Raised from humble beginnings it soon becomes apparent that the protagonist's strengths are also his weaknesses: his self-confidence turns to pride and his masculinity develops into totalitarian rule leading to uncontrollable rage. Haunted by the cowardly actions of his unmanly father Unoka, Okonkwo is determined to become everything his father never was: clansman, warrior and great leader. The father of a twelve-year-old son named Nwoye, Okonkwo fears his son is unmanly and will end up a failure just like his father Unoka.¹

As a prestigious member of his community and noted for his extraordinary achievements, Okonkwo is rewarded with numerous titles and honours. In a settlement with a neighbouring tribe, the village is rewarded a virgin and a fifteen-year-old boy named Ikemefuna. The protagonist, charged the protection of the boy, finds an ideal and willing son in Ikemefuna and a strong bond is struck between the two. However, despite the fact that the boy refers to his guardian as 'father', the protagonist, Okonkwo, finds it very hard to show any sign of emotion for the boy. The protagonist receives a generous loan of 800 yams in order to start a farm. Okonkwo's success, however, quickly begins to lead to his ultimate demise, as his behaviour becomes ever more obsessive. The protagonist's totalitarian style leadership and what I interpret to be the repression of his true emotions, embedded deep

¹ It is the protagonist's belief that the 'Yam' represents manliness and he who can provide for his family is surely a great man. However, similarly to the protagonist's father, Unoka, his son, Nwoye, shows "disquieting signs of laziness" (25), aggravating the protagonist's fear of the 'unmanly' reflection of his father in his son.

within his unconscious mind, lead to many conflicts with other members of the village, but more importantly with his own family, who begin to fear him. During the week of peace, Okonkwo's hasty temper incites him to severely beat his youngest wife Ojiugo, breaking the traditions of the festival that strictly forbids any form of violence. However, Okonkwo commits his ultimate sin, following the sacrifice of his son Ikemefuna, which brings far-reaching consequences for him and his family. Interestingly, following his son, Nwoye's conversion to the white man's religion, Okonkwo rejects the "effeminate" (Achebe 112) reflection of his father, now common to his son. Following the accidental death of a young boy, Okonkwo seeks refuge among his mother's kinsmen. However, during Okonkwo's absence Christian missionaries begin to arrive in Umuofia with the intention of converting the indigenous population to Christianity. Tension between the villagers and the missionaries finally explodes when a Christian convert named Enoch eats a sacred python and publicly unmasks an *egwugwu* (an assembly of tribesmen masked as spirits), an act equivalent to killing an ancestral spirit. The tribe retaliates by ostracizing the Christians and burning down the Christian church. In return the British call together the leaders of Umuofia in order to induce a dialogue between the two very different cultures, but retaliate by arresting all those in attendance.

In the final chapters of Achebe's novel, Okonkwo returns from exile to the village of Umuofia with hopes of reclaiming his former status and power within his community. However, life in Umuofia has changed drastically since the arrival of the Christian missionaries, and the villagers are divided as to whether or not they should take action for the imprisonment of their leaders. Expecting his fellow clan members to join him in uprising, Okonkwo kills their leader with his machete. When the crowd allows the other messengers to escape, Okonkwo realizes that his clan is not willing to go to war. The next day the District commissioner himself arrives at the village to arrest Okonkwo, only to find that this once great Umuofian warrior has tragically hanged himself.

3. PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH

The Freudian psychoanalytic approach is based on the premise that human behaviour is driven by an unconscious process. In contrast to the prevailing train of thought of the time (1856-1939), which focused upon the image of a human as a rational conscious being, Sigmund Freud, a young Viennese physician theorised that the human psyche was dominated by a more comprehensive realm of unconscious sexual and aggressive impulses. Dismissed by academic psychologists for most of the 20th century, scholars have always contested and disputed questions surrounding the scientific validity of Freudian theory. “Was it science or mere armchair speculation? Did Freud propose testable hypotheses? Are his ideas experimentally verifiable, testable or falsifiable” (Feist, Feist 53). However, despite the shortcomings of Freud’s work as a scientific theory it remains one of the most powerful forms of modern literary interpretation for investigating an individual’s unconscious thoughts and feelings (Smith, Hoeksema and Fredrickson 459).

In order to better understand human behaviour, Freud, developed a theoretical model of the human psyche which employed three levels of consciousness – the *conscious*, the *preconscious*, and the *unconscious* (Hjelle and Zielgler 85). According to Freud significant aspects of human behaviour are dominated by repressed unconscious primitive impulses that lay beyond the consciousness. He believed that this unconscious material such as forgotten childhood trauma, hostile feelings towards a parent and repressed sexual desires were not only unattainable by the conscious psyche but responsible for much of our everyday behaviour. Unconscious instinctual urges such as dreams or slips of the tongue, could however reveal symbolised forms of our unconscious psyche.

Realising the simplicity of his conceptual model of mental life, Freud developed the provinces of the mind and subdivided the human personality into: the *id*, the *ego*, and the *superego* (Hjelle and Zielgler 86). The *id* thought to be the most primitive, instinctive aspect of the personality lay in the unconscious, inaccessible to all forms of conscious thought. The

only structure present at birth, the *id* is thought to be linked to our most instinctual biological impulses such as the need to eat, drink, defecate and gain sexual pleasure. In fact, Freud believed that of all our primitive impulses aggression and the need to copulate were the most instinctual determinants of all human behaviour. Although expressed as a hypothesis, Freud believed the *id* to be “raw, animalistic, and chaotic, it knows no laws, obeys no rules and remains basic to the individual throughout life” (Hjelle and Zielgler 88). Similarly to a newborn infant’s unconscious drive, the *id* seeks to avoid anxiety by satisfying its most basic desires. That is to say that the *id* solely serves what Freud termed the *pleasure principle*. This process included the immediate alleviation of built-up tension and would manifest itself in an impulsive, irrational, and narcissistic manner, regardless of the consequences for oneself and others. Unable to comprehend fear and anxiety but more importantly reality, the *id* will not attempt to consider reason which, Freud considered extremely dangerous for the individual and or society (Hjelle and Zielgler 88).

The *ego*, representing the self, is according to Freud the only part of the mind in touch with reality. Evolving from the *id*, the *ego* is said to function as a communicative tool with the external world. As the only part of the mind in touch with reality, the *ego* which is governed by the *reality principle* dominates a person’s personality. Although able to govern the strong urges of the *pleasure principle* of the *id*, the *ego* can lose control and succumb to the *id*’s most basic sexual and aggressive impulses. Susceptible to anxious torment, the *ego* must, in full view of the external world, inhibit the infantile demands of the unconscious, the preconscious and the conscious self. Predictably, the *ego* must repress any socially inappropriate emotions, relying on defence mechanisms to protect it from angst (Feist, Feist 29).

According to Freud, the *superego* represented the moral and ideal aspects of one’s personality. Evolving from the *ego*, the *superego* unlike the *ego* is not in touch with the external world. Subsequently, the *superego* is indifferent to the well-being of the *ego*, and exerts unrealistic demands on the *ego* in its quest for perfection. Sexual and aggressive

impulses are repressed by the *ego*. However, failure to repress the impulses in accordance with the *superego's* moral ideals may result in a feeling of guilt and anxiety. Furthermore, should the *ego* fail to meet the *superego's* high moral demands, feelings of weakness and inferiority will prevail (Feist, Feist 30).

To summarise, Freud noted that the divisions between the *id*, the *ego* and the *superego* were far from clear and as unique and diverse as every person's individual personality. For instance, an individual in possession of a dominant *id* will be unable to resist the insatiable impulse for pleasure, regardless of the *consequences*. Similarly, a weak *ego* which is unable to control the unrealistic impulses of the *id* and/or the *superego* will result in feelings of anguish, guilt and inferiority. However, a well-rounded, balanced individual in possession of a dominant *ego* which can inhibit the primeval impulses of the *id* (*pleasure principle*) and *superego* (moralistic principle) will not suffer from anxious torment or extreme fluctuations of temperament and self-confidence (Feist, Feist 31).

In order to avoid feelings of angst, the *ego*, the only part of one's psyche in touch with the real world, must repress any unconscious socially inappropriate emotions, relying on defence mechanisms to protect it from angst (Feist, Feist 34). However, although the use of defence mechanisms may be viewed as a universal phenomenon among a wide variety of individuals, "when carried to an extreme they lead to compulsive, repetitive, and neurotic behaviour" (Feist, Feist 34). The principal defence mechanisms identified by Freud and later refined by his daughter Anna, and applicable within the scope of this essay include *repression, displacement, regression, projection, introjection and sublimation*. *Repression* is thought to be an integral component among all defence mechanism and works by repressing the inhibited sexual and aggressive impulses of the *id* and *superego*, in accordance with accepted social norms (Feist, Feist 35).

Displacement is the result of the *ego* alleviating angst by redirecting an impulse from one object/person to another object/person. That is to say that hatred for one's own sibling

may well be displaced or redirected to another object/person, maintaining a good relationship within the family, and alleviating the ego of any unnecessary anxiety.

Regression is the result of the libido's (sexual impulse/ drive) desire to regress to earlier more primitive stages of development when exposed to unwanted anxiety. An adult for example may curl up into the foetal position, hide under a cover or in the case of the protagonist in Achebe's novel, return home to one's mother.

Overwhelmed by the infantile demands of the *id* and *superego*, the *ego* in an effort to protect itself from angst, may attempt to project certain impulses onto other objects/persons. Termed *Projection*, Freud defined this mechanism as the ego's ability to project one's own socially undesirable characteristics such as fear and cowardice onto other objects and or persons. This would have the effect of perceiving one's own faults, embedded deep within the unconscious mind, in others.

Dissimilar to the example given above, *Introjection* defines the ego's ability to adopt positive qualities characterised by other objects/persons. The authors Feist and Feist explain that such introjections afford their host the feeling of an inflated sense of self-importance, motivated by self-interest, avoiding feelings of inadequacy.

Sublimation "is the repression of the genital aim of Eros² by substituting a cultural or social aim" (Feist, Feist 38). The sublimated aim or rather repressed material, is expressed into something grander in the form of the arts, and or other noble social aim. Dissimilar to other defence mechanisms, sublimation may benefit both the individual and society. Freud believed that succeeding the phallic stage of development (3-4yrs of age), or *introjection* of one's father, the young adolescent male developed sexual impulses towards his mother. Recognising the incompatibility of the two impulses, the son was thought to abandon the *introjection* of his father in favour of the sexual impulses experienced towards his mother. As a result, the father became his son's adversary in love and an aspiration to slaughter his

² *Eros*- the desire for an enduring union with a loved one. (Feist, Feist G5)

father was formed. According to Freud, this masculine behaviour emulating on the one hand, a sexual impulse towards the mother, yet hostility towards the father, defined the phenomenon termed the *simple male Oedipus complex* (Feist, Feist 41).

In summary, defence mechanisms protect the ego from the infantile demands of the unconscious, the preconscious and the conscious self, alleviating the ego of anxiety. Considered a universal phenomenon in that it is a behaviour utilised among a wide variety of individuals, “when carried to an extreme they lead to compulsive, repetitive, and neurotic behaviour” (Feist, Feist 34). Furthermore, the simple male Oedipus complex which can be described in simple terms as a sexual impulse towards one’s mother, resulting in the expression of hostility towards one’s father, may help to explain the tormented relations between the protagonist and his father and sons.

4. ANALYSIS

Achebe’s novel can be divided into three central scenes consisting of the protagonist’s rise from humble beginnings, exile from the village Umuofia & his return to Umuofia. However, despite the author’s depiction of a conflict between two very different cultures divided by many variables such as gender, race, religion & age, this essay will explore the relation between human behaviour and the unconscious psyche in the analysis of the protagonist, Okonkwo’s tragic demise.

In the first chapters of the novel we are introduced to the protagonist, Okonkwo. A young, physically strong and confident man whose “fame rested on solid personal achievements” (Achebe 3). Much-admired for his physical prowess in the ring, villagers still speak of Okonkwo’s legendary wrestling attainments. In fact, based on his past successes, Umuofians award Okonkwo by appointing him leader of the emissaries of war to the neighbouring village Mbano. On his arrival to the village of Mbano, Okonkwo is treated with great honour and respect. On his return, Umuofians entrust the great warrior, Okonkwo, with the custody of a young boy (Ikemefuna). Similarly, on starting a farm, Okonkwo, already a

prestigious member of the community receives a generous loan of 800 yams. Interestingly, the loan is given on the premise that unlike his fellow clansmen, Okonkwo will surely succeed and make good on his loan. This he does, despite the effects of a terrible drought. Undaunted by his humble beginnings and the devastating effects of nature, Okonkwo inevitably becomes one of Umoufias most respected and successful leaders.

However, despite the novels introductory emphasis upon the masculine attributes and successes of this great Umoufian warrior, the anxiety caused by the distaste for his father is all too apparent. For “He had no patience with unsuccessful men, he had no patience with his father” (Achebe 3). Already, embedded within the third paragraph, we learn of the protagonist’s distaste for his father; a distaste which motivates the protagonist to overcome his father Unoka’s legacy. Cited throughout the first chapters it becomes apparent that Okonkwo’s father, Unoka, represents all that the Ibo tribesmen abhor. A gifted musician that loves good fellowship, Unoka is portrayed as a man who lacks ambition, yet is gentle and sensitive to nature’s ever changing beauty. However, Okonkwo’s “life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and weakness... It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father” (Achebe 11).

It may be suggested that the citation above is an example of the fear and anxiety that lay deep within the protagonist’s unconscious psyche. Though what is the cause of Okonkwo’s fear, his resentment, for despite his failings Unoka is a sensitive man and a loving father. “Do not despair. I know you will not despair. You have a manly and a proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride” (Achebe 19).

These are not the words of a resentful father, nor adversary, but rather a parent who despite his son’s vengeful attacks offers him a loving, guiding and supporting hand, as any loving parent would. His advice, however, tries “Okonkwo’s patience beyond words” (Achebe 19). In order to understand the root of Okonkwo’s demise and the anxiety that lay

deep within his unconscious psyche, we must first understand the relationship to both parents and in particular his mother which; when compared with the relationship between Okonkwo and his father, is set very much in the background. However, as noted earlier it is my understanding that Okonkwo's relationship to his mother plays a significant role in explaining the tense relationship with his own father and sons. Furthermore, the anxiety caused by the relationship to his mother will help to explain the cause of Okonkwo's compulsive, repetitive, and neurotic behaviour, which ultimately leads to his downfall.

4.1 The Simple Male Oedipus Complex

Interestingly, despite having what I interpret to be a deepening affect upon the young boy's relationship with the external world, Achebe's novel contains but one substantive reference to Okonkwo's mother throughout the entire novel (Okpewho 182). Consumed with the tortured relationship between Okonkwo and his father, and the overtly masculine traditions synonymous with Achebe's depiction of Africa, the author fails to grant Okonkwo's mother a name. The allusion to his mother lasts but one short paragraph and is thus quoted below:

For the first time in three nights, Okonkwo slept... He stretched himself and scratched his thigh where a mosquito had bitten him as he slept. Another one was wailing near his right ear. He slapped the ear and hoped he had killed it. Why do they always go for one's ear? When he was a child his mother had told him a story about it. But it was as silly as all women's stories. Mosquito, she had said, had asked Ear to marry him, whereupon Ear fell on the floor in uncontrollable laughter. How much longer do you think you will live? She asked. 'You are already a skeleton'. Mosquito went away humiliated, and any time he passed her way he told Ear that he was still alive. Okonkwo turned on his side and went back to sleep. (Achebe 55)

The allusion to Okonkwo's mother as exemplified occurs in chapter nine and seems to hold no particular significance for the narrative as a whole. However, the allusion in question

occurs but three days after the ritual murder of Okonkwo's adopted son Ikemefuna, an event that has caused the great Umuofian warrior much anxiety, an event which I shall examine in more detail later on. Nevertheless, Okonkwo's painful anguish may be interpreted as a result of the ego's inability to control the infantile demands of the unconscious mind, thus resulting in the protagonist's hand in the death of his adopted son, Ikemefuna. Unable to neither eat nor sleep for two whole days, the protagonist is obviously physically and emotionally exhausted. On the third day he awakes in the middle of night, having come to terms with his terrible deed. However, it may be interpreted that following the protagonist's hand in the death of his son, Ikemefuna, Okonkwo is no longer ruled by the rational actions of his ego, nor conscious mind. On the contrary, it is the irrational impulses synonymous with his unconscious *id* and *superego* that now govern the thoughts and actions of Umuofia's greatest warrior. Having been abruptly awoken from the bite of a mosquito, his mind drifting between conscious and unconscious thought, it may be argued that it is in fact the protagonist's *superego*, which partly consists of the internalised representations of the ideals and morals of overtly masculine Ibo society (Smith, Hoeksema and Fredrickson 460) that form the basis of his rationalisation in coming to terms with his deed. If then the protagonist is now governed by his unconscious mind (*superego*, *id*) it is significant that during his darkest days he would reflect upon the childhood tales once spoken by his mother, the first woman to enter his life, the first woman to take a hold of his heart. Furthermore, although the protagonist attempts to distant the obvious impulse to be close to his mother, "But it was as silly as all women's stories" (Achebe 55), it is significant that the memory of her soothing voice, despite his anguish and fears, sends the protagonist straight back off to sleep.

Following the accidental death of a young boy, a death for which Okonkwo is held responsible, Okonkwo's home is burnt to the ground, his live-stock is slaughtered and he is forced to flee Umuofia. It is significant that during the protagonist's most trying times he decides to return to the memory of his mother, her last resting place on earth. The protagonist's actions may also be interpreted as a desire to regress to earlier more primitive

stages of development having been exposed to unwanted anxiety. And as previously exemplified an adult may curl up into the foetal position, hide or as in the case of the protagonist return home to the comforting embrace of the memory of one's mother.

Although we know very little of the relationship between the protagonist and his mother, I feel it is fair to say that Achebe's novel includes strong evidence relating the protagonist's early rejection of his father. "Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness". (Achebe 10) According to Freud, the rejection of one's father preceded the development of sexual impulses for one's mother. Recognising the incompatibility of the two impulses, the son is thought to abandon the *introjection* of his father in favour of the sexual impulses experienced towards his mother. As a result, the father became his son's adversary in love and an aspiration to slaughter his father was formed.

As mentioned above, the masculine behaviour emulating on the one hand a sexual impulse towards the mother, yet hostility towards the father, defined what Freud termed the *simple male Oedipus complex* (Feist, Feist 41). This would certainly explain the tense relationship experienced between Okonkwo and his father which, from a Freudian perspective it has been argued is the result of Okonkwo's relationship to his mother. Furthermore, it may be argued that the relationship between Okonkwo and his mother and fear lest he should become his father is but a repression of the genital aim of Eros.³ Motivated by the sublimated aim or repressed sexual material towards his mother, Okonkwo is destined to overcome his father's legacy, a legacy he aspires to overcome regardless the cost. In fact, his obsession, lest he should succeed, can almost be considered the symbolic slaughter of his father. Motivated by his repressed sexual material, Okonkwo fears and hates the reflection of his father. A reflection, a legacy he must overcome. However, Okonkwo is not privy to the infantile demands of his unconscious mind or the root of the fear, feeding his anger. For this reason alone it is important when reflecting upon the actions of the protagonist that one considers the ever increasing anxiety, building beneath the conscious

³ Eros- the desire for an enduring union with a loved one (Feist, Feist G5)

self, yet motivating the protagonist's ever obsessive compulsive, repetitive, and neurotic behaviour" (Feist, Feist 34). As Freud himself noted, significant aspects of human behaviour are dominated by repressed unconscious primitive impulses that lay beyond the consciousness. He believed that this unconscious material such as forgotten childhood trauma, hostile feelings towards a parent and repressed sexual desires were not only unattainable by the conscious psyche but responsible for much of our everyday behaviour.

4.2 The Reflection of my Father

As exemplified above, it would be fair to assume that the anxious torment experienced during Okonkwo's life, is in part the result of his relation to his mother as well as his *ego's* failure to inhibit the infantile demands of the unconscious, the preconscious and the conscious self. Predictably, the *ego* must repress any socially inappropriate impulses relying on defence mechanisms to protect it from angst (Feist, Feist 29). Although the use of defence mechanisms may be viewed as a universal phenomenon among a wide variety of individuals, "when carried to an extreme they lead to compulsive, repetitive, and neurotic behaviour" (Feist, Feist 34).

Having established the root of his fear "the fear of failure and weakness... the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father" (Achebe 11), this essay will now analyse some of the factors leading to the protagonist's eventual demise. For it soon becomes apparent that the protagonist's strengths are also his weaknesses: his self-confidence turns to pride and his masculinity develops into totalitarian rule leading to uncontrollable rage. Probably, the most intricate moral dilemma faced by the protagonist throughout the novel includes the killing of his adopted son Ikemefuna. However, before analysing this scene in closer detail, I shall reflect upon the relation to his only son, Nwoye, a relationship which better illustrates the torment experienced by the protagonist, as a result of his *ego's* failure to inhibit the infantile demands of the unconscious, the preconscious and the conscious self. The protagonist's failure or as argued, inability to come to terms with his true

emotions, inevitably results in increasing conflict among family and friends, leading to the eventual death of his step-son, Ikemefuna. Having, as exemplified earlier, first introjected from his father at an early age, it may be argued that Okonkwo is to some degree, yet on an unconscious level, a reflection of his father's true emotions. That is to say a reflection of all that Ibo tribesmen abhor. Motivated by the sublimated aim, to achieve greatness, to overcome his father's legacy, we begin to understand Okonkwo's pain, his anxiety as a result of his ego's failure to inhibit the unattainable conflict within, resulting in ever obsessive, neurotic masculine behaviour. Thus, we begin to witness the protagonist's demise as he loses touch with those dearest to him.

The father of a twelve-year-old boy named Nwoye, Okonkwo fears his son reflects the unmanly, unsuccessful traits of his father before him. Ruling his household with a "heavy hand" (Achebe 19), Okonkwo's wives and especially the children fear his perpetual fiery temper. Governed by the fears that lay deep within his unconscious psyche, the protagonist constantly plagues and beats the young boy, Nwoye. Though it is not the failings of his son nor wives that cause the protagonist to lash out in rage, but rather the fear that fuelled his anger, the fear lest he should resemble the introjection of his father. Overwhelmed by the infantile demands of the unconscious, the preconscious and the conscious self the *ego* will attempt to defend itself by projecting one's own undesirable characteristics upon other objects/persons. In fact, as witnessed in the following citation the protagonist is only ever truly at ease, having fulfilled the unrealistic demands of his *superego* in its quest for masculine perfection. "Inwardly pleased at his son's (Nwoye) development..., happy when he heard him grumbling about women" (Achebe 38), Okonkwo encourages the boys to listen to "masculine stories of violence and bloodshed". (Achebe 39)

However, as exemplified below, Okonkwo's son Nwoye is but a reflection of his father's true emotions, unmanly emotions Okonkwo has long since repressed beneath his conscious self. Nevertheless, it is the unmanly emotions or reflections of his father that infuriate Okonkwo. Fearing his father's uncontrollable rage, Nwoye conceals his true emotions, for

unlike Okonkwo who is motivated by the aim of Eros and fear, lest he should resemble his father, Nwoye is motivated by the fear of Okonkwo's heavy hand.

“Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell...That was the kind of story that Nwoye loved. But he now knew that they were for foolish women and children, and he knew that his father wanted him to be a man”. (Achebe 39)

Unable to repress his true emotions, thus reflecting the image of his father's father, Nwoye having been informed of Ikemefuna's departure, breaks down into tears. Driven by the genital aim of Eros and subsequent aspiration to symbolically slaughter his father, Okonkwo is forced to act. Consequently, we witness Okonkwo symbolically beat the 'unmanly' representation of his father's attributes, common to his son. Dominated by the repressed unconscious primitive impulses that lay beyond the consciousness, and fuelled by the ever increasing anxiety building beneath the conscious self, Okonkwo's behaviour becomes ever more compulsive, repetitive, and neurotic (Feist, Feist 34). “Later in the day he called Ikemefuna and told him that he was to be taken home the next day. Nwoye overheard it and burst into tears, whereupon his father beat him heavily” (Achebe 42).

His self-confidence turning to pride and his masculinity developing into totalitarian rule leading to uncontrollable rage, Okonkwo begins to fall fail to his own unrealistic masculine ideals. Dominated by the repressed unconscious primitive impulses that lay beyond his conscious-self, Okonkwo is unable to inhibit further conflict with other members of the village and his own family begin to fear him. Thus, we begin to witness the protagonist's demise as he loses touch with those dearest to him. In fact his own son, Nwoye, tired of his father's overtly masculine ideals and subsequent projections, eventually rejects him.

4.3 Breaking the Sacred Week of Peace

During the sacred week of peace, a festival honouring peace in respect of the earth goddess, whom it was believed would bless the coming crop; Okonkwo notices the absence of his youngest wife, Ojiugo. Unable to inhibit the infantile demands of his unconscious, or rather repress the socially inappropriate and aggressive impulses of his *id*, the protagonist subjects his wife to a merciless beating. In fact, not even the alarming cries from his first two wives can disrupt his uncontrollable rage, a rage uncommon to Umuofia. For Okonkwo no longer represents the attributes he was admired for and despite Ibo customs strictly forbidding any form of violence, Okonkwo's ideal of masculinity erupts into uncontrollable rage. Thus we begin to witness the demise of this former great warrior, as his strengths become his weaknesses.

“Before it was dusk Ezeani, who was the priest of the earth goddess, Ani, called on Okonkwo in his *obi*. Okonkwo brought out kola nut and placed it before the priest. Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors... You have committed a great evil”. (Achebe 23)

As is exemplified above, Okonkwo's inability to control the infantile demands of the unconscious mind provoke him to mercifully beat his youngest wife, despite traditional Ibo customs. Consequently, he not only begins to lose touch with those dearest to him, but also the clan as a whole for the evil he has committed against the 'goddess of the earth', “without whose blessing our crops will not grow” (Achebe 23). Ibo tribal customs dictate every aspect of a man's' worth. In fact without custom and tradition, the tribe ceases to exist. Unable to repent for his violations against the earth goddess and his people, Umuofians begin to believe Okonkwo has become too self-important. Fearing the repercussions of his actions, whispers begin to circulate relating this once great warrior's lack of respect for the gods and his clan. Subsequently, Okonkwo's status among his family and friends diminish. “His

enemies said his good fortune had gone to his head. They called him the little bird *nza*⁴ who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his *chi*⁵ (Achebe 23).

4.4 Okonkwo's Worst Crime

Relations with his adopted son Ikemefuna are good, and the young boy quickly becomes popular in Okonkwo's household. However, the protagonist never shows him any affection for fear he might be considered 'unmanly'. Considered the protagonist's most complex dilemma throughout the novel, his hand in the death of his step-son, Ikemefuna, is deemed "tantamount to an offense against the gods of the land" (Okpewho 83). Devouring a feast of locusts, Okonkwo is taken by surprise, following the unexpected arrival of one of the village elders. A former courageous warrior himself, Ogbuefi commands great respect among his clansmen. However, Ogbuefi is not the bearer of good news and subsequently informs Okonkwo of the Oracle's decision to kill his step-son, Ikemefuna. Somewhat surprised, Okonkwo listens as the village elder repeats himself, "The boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death" (Achebe 41). As the oldest man in Umuofia, and mediator between the living and the dead, Ogbuefi Ezeudu's warning should be significant enough to be adhered to (Okpewho 85). The next day a deathly silence falls upon Okonkwo's household as the party leads Ikemefuna away on what is to become his final journey. Reflecting over the past years, Ikemefuna "can hardly imagine that Okonkwo was not his real father" (Achebe 43), and he visualises the gratitude his mother would undoubtedly display towards Okonkwo, on his return home. "Ikemefuna felt like a child once more. It must be the thought of going home to his mother" (Achebe 44).

"As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his matchet, 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

⁴ For more information relating Igbo didactic animal tales and the *nza* bird, see (Ogbaa p.112).

⁵ For more information relating Igbo divinities, and an individual's personal god, his *chi*, see (Ogbaa p.134).

towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut him down.

He was afraid of being thought weak". (Achebe 44)

This essay has thus far established Okonkwo's inner most fear, "the fear of failure and weakness... the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father" (Achebe 11). A father whom reflected all that Ibo tribesmen abhor. Motivated by the sublimated aim, to achieve greatness, to overcome his father's legacy, Okonkwo, afraid of appearing weak, afraid of resembling his father, is compelled to assist in the sacrificial slaughter of his stepson. Turning away from the inevitable deadly strike, Okonkwo, now paralysed by fear, yet overwhelmed by the infantile demands to protect his ego from angst, draws his machete and serves a final cutting blow. Freud believed that the *id* was "raw, animalistic, and chaotic, knows no laws, obeys no rules and remains basic to the individual throughout life" (Hjelle & Ziegler 88). Similarly to a newborn infant's unconscious drive, the *id* seeks to avoid anxiety by satisfying its most basic desires. That is to say that the *id* solely serves what Freud termed the *pleasure principle*. This process includes the immediate alleviation of built up tension manifesting in an impulsive, irrational, and narcissistic manner, regardless of the consequences for oneself and others. Unable to comprehend fear and anxiety but more importantly reality, the *id* will not attempt to consider reason which, Freud considered extremely dangerous for the individual and or society (Hjelle och Zielgler 88).

Motivated by the sublimated aim, to achieve greatness, to overcome his father's legacy, Okonkwo, afraid of appearing weak, afraid of resembling his father commits his worst crime to date. Though this is not just an impulsive, irrational narcissistic reaction to the fear "of being thought weak" (Achebe 44), but also the cowardice actions of a tragic man, overwhelmed by the unrealistic masculine ideals of his *superego* which, represents the moral and ideal aspects of one's personality. Evolving from the *ego*, the *superego* unlike the *ego* is not in touch with the external world. Subsequently, the *superego* is indifferent to the well-being of the *ego*, and exerts unrealistic demands on the *ego* in its quest for perfection which, in the case of Okonkwo may be interpreted as masculine perfection. Unable to repress the

sexual and aggressive impulses of the *superego* following his hand in the slaughter of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo is subjected to feelings of guilt and anxiety (Feist, Feist 30).

Similarly to the incident depicted during the Week of Peace, the protagonist's unconscious mind does not hear the distant pleas of his gods or fellow tribesman. Unable to comprehend his own mind, his own actions, the protagonist reflects upon his past, and begins to question his personal god or *chi* (Achebe 96). Interestingly, Okonkwo fails to consider his own hand in the events to date and sees no connection among his breaking the Week of Peace or killing Ikemefuna. In Okonkwo's eyes, his troubles result from ill fate and chance. Ultimately however, it is Okonkwo's ever obsessive compulsive, repetitive and neurotic behaviour that lead to his demise.

4.5 A Mere Reflection of my Former Self

In the final section of Achebe's novel, Okonkwo returns home from exile with hopes of reclaiming his former self, for "His life had been ruled by a great passion – to become one of the lords of the clan" (Achebe 96). However, the village of Umuofia has drastically changed since the arrival of the Europeans and Okonkwo learns of his son, Nwoye's disgrace. Reflecting over the loss his son to the 'effeminate' men's religion, a fury rises within him as Okonkwo considers taking his machete to the 'vile' mans' church. Having avenged the blasphemous act of a convert by burning down the Christian church, Umuofians' are divided as to whether or not they should avenge the District Commissioners unjust treatment of the perpetrators. "Choked with hate" (Achebe 142), Okonkwo has vowed, if need be, to oppose the white man alone.

However, "for the first time in many years Okonkwo had a feeling that was akin to happiness... The clan which had turned false on him appeared to be making amends" (Achebe 140). Nevertheless, following a village gathering to determine the future of Umuofia, the protagonist is forced to confront his greatest fear. Striking down but one of five court messengers, realising Umuofia would not go to war, the broken protagonist poses the

questions, Why? “Why did he do it” (Achebe 149). Why did he hate his father? Why did he beat his son? Why did his youngest wife fear him? Why did Ikemefuna show weakness and run?

“Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his father crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice...” (Achebe 112).

Unable to come to terms with his predicament, unable to satisfy the high moral demands of his *superego*, feelings of weakness and inferiority prevail (Feist, Feist 30). Clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things” (Achebe 96). Unable to turn to others, his self-confidence swallowed by his pride, Okonkwo quietly slips away into the eternal shadows of death.

5 CONCLUSION

The tragic demise of the former great Umoufian warrior and his Africa has in Achebe’s novel been attributed to the tragic encounter between European and African societies (Ogbaa xv). This essay however has focused upon Freudian theories of the unconscious mind in its interpretation of the protagonist, Okonkwo, and his eventual demise. According to Freud significant aspects of human behaviour are dominated by repressed unconscious primitive impulses that lie beyond the consciousness. He believed that this unconscious material such as forgotten childhood trauma, hostile feelings towards a parent and repressed sexual desires were not only unattainable by the conscious psyche but responsible for much of our everyday behaviour.

Having analysed the relationship between the protagonist and his mother, and the tormented relationship with his father, this essay sought to determine the interaction between what Freud himself termed the id, the ego and the superego, in order to explain some of the protagonist’s unruly actions which, this essay has argued, lead to his eventual demise.

Although we know very little of the relationship between the protagonist and his mother, this essay argued that following the introjection of his father, the protagonist developed a sexual impulse towards his mother. Motivated by the sublimated aim, to achieve greatness, and symbolically slaughter his father by overcoming his father's legacy, Okonkwo, afraid of appearing weak, afraid of resembling his father, commits his worst crime. Unable to control the infantile demands of his unconscious mind, the protagonist succumbs to great 'evil'. Unable to apologise for the violations against his gods, against his people, Okonkwo is mocked by his fellow clansmen. Overwhelmed by the unrealistic infantile demands of the unconscious, which Freud argued were indifferent to the well-being of the *ego*, Okonkwo is unable to comprehend the distant pleas of his gods and his fellow tribesman. A mere reflection of his former self, feelings of weakness and inferiority prevail (Feist, Feist 30), leading to his ultimate demise.

Thus based upon the Oedipal overtone affecting the inter-generational conflicts between father and son; and Freudian theories relating human behaviour and the unconscious psyche, this essay has argued that in the defence of the protagonist's ego, which must repress the infantile demands of the unconscious, the preconscious and the conscious self, the protagonist's behaviour became ever more compulsive, repetitive, and neurotic. Subsequently, his self-confidence turns to pride and his masculinity develops into totalitarian rule leading to uncontrollable rage, the protagonist's world literally falls apart.

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