

Okonkwo: Nietzschean Nobleman or Man of *Ressentiment*?

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In *Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche describes the nobleman as a powerful individual who establishes meanings of good and bad based on his or her station in life, while looking upon the lower class and its weaknesses as a contrast to his or her superiority. As a result, the lower class builds *ressentiment* from its oppression and weaknesses, developing a bad conscience and defining the acts of the nobleman as evil. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe recounts the life of Okonkwo, an African tribesman who gains status through recognition and hard work in his attempts to disassociate himself from the shameful life of his father, Unoka. Okonkwo tries to present himself as a strong, accomplished, and capable member of the community, while he burns with resentment and pain in his soul. Therefore, Chinua Achebe presents Okonkwo as attempting to convey himself to his community as a Nietzschean nobleman externally, while also presenting him as possessing the emotions of a resentful Nietzschean lower-classman internally.

According to Nietzsche, the good in society is defined by those who have power, just as Okonkwo and the clansmen define what is good in their society. Good becomes associated with strength and wealth, while bad becomes associated with the poverty of the lower classes. The noblemen name their own happiness as good, while defining what the less fortunate lack as bad (Nietzsche 26). The upper class looks upon the lower class as unfortunate and considers itself fortunate for not having to live such an unprivileged lifestyle. Likewise, Okonkwo and the other clansmen define the rules and regulations that govern their tribe. They define what is right and

decide the laws and make decisions based on their beliefs. Okonkwo sees himself and his prosperity as good, while defining the poor, weak lifestyle of his father, including his love of music, as bad. Also, Okonkwo considers himself to be a very respected and influential man in his village through his displays of strength from killing five men in battle and becoming the “greatest wrestler in all the land” (Achebe 27). In addition, he endeavors to show his dominance and prosperity from his wealth in farming and providing for his family. Okonkwo regards himself as the master of his household, directing the lives of his three wives and eight sons and daughters, exerting his influence over them while providing them with huts and plentiful amounts of yams (Achebe 14). Proud of his influence, he possesses a sense of superiority through his power over them. Also, Okonkwo takes pride in his stature in his and the surrounding villages as a man with status and influence, thinking that he is happy because he is not one of them, or not part of the lower, unaccomplished, and unfortunate society. Nietzsche claims that the nobleman looks upon the lower class as a group of people who make himself seem more important and powerful. Also, he states that the nobleman is a blond beast who is respectful and even kind to others of similar rank, but looks down upon others with contempt (Nietzsche 40). Likewise, Okonkwo honors and respects the elders of the village and his fellow tribesmen and thinks that those below his station in life serve only to make him look better, thus heightening his sense of achievement. Those who are weak, womanly, and without titles, drawing a clear distinction between his high status and their lowly station in life, only heighten his own position as a respected individual, making him consider himself fortunate to be able to live so prosperously. Thus, Okonkwo attempts to display himself to the rest of his society as a strong, powerful, and even happy man, the nobleman as described by Nietzsche.

Since Nietzsche's nobleman is so full of power and domination, he does not hold grudges for long, just as Okonkwo aims to present himself as forgiving others relatively quickly. The nobleman has such a "strong, full nature" with an excess amount of power, that after punishment is given, he is incapable of harboring his enemy's accidents or misdeeds seriously for very long, recuperating and forgetting the wrongs done against him (Nietzsche 38). He "exhausts himself in immediate reaction, and therefore, does not poison" his mind from misdeeds done against him by the poor and common people (Nietzsche 39). Likewise, Okonkwo and the tribesmen display their forgiving qualities for wrongs committed against them. When inhabitants of the community commit offenses, they leave as a punishment, but then are welcome again after they serve their time away from the village. When Okonkwo accidentally kills another man's son, he must leave for seven years, but he will be welcomed back when he returns. No one in the community actually despises him for the incident, and they are able to keep from holding grudges and harboring angry feelings against him. Likewise, Okonkwo does not stay angry toward his family members for too long a period of time. When his second wife cuts leaves from a banana tree, he beats her, and then presents himself as not holding a grudge against her for very long, "his anger thus satisfied" (Achebe 38). He beats her as an expression of his power, and he then eventually forgives her. Also, when Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, runs away to join the church, Okonkwo claims that he overcomes the sorrow. Since he has five other sons, he tells himself that he will plan to bring them up in the way of the clan, thus he tries not to dwell too heavily on the loss of one son (Achebe 172). When a missionary preaches about Christianity and the Trinity, condemning the beliefs of the African culture, which is an insult to the tribesmen, Okonkwo, convincing himself that the missionary is mad, just shrugs his shoulders (Achebe 147). Okonkwo tries to feel that since he possesses so much power and prestige, he is able to forgive

easily and does not harbor bad feelings for too long of a time, just as the Nietzschean nobleman does not harbor wrongs committed against him.

While attempting to convey himself to others as having the qualities of a Nietzschean nobleman, Okonkwo, in reality, harbors feelings of resentment inside of himself, thus actually possessing the characteristics of slave morality. According to Nietzsche, the oppressed develop *ressentiment* against those who oppress them, allowing hatred for their enemies to grow within their souls. Okonkwo's enemy is his fear of weakness, stemming from his anger toward the failures and weakness of his father (Achebe 13). This fear, deep within himself, along with his development of a bad conscience, dominates his whole life, preventing him from becoming the strong man he so desires. Okonkwo grows up with a weak, womanly father, Unoka, who never gains any titles and never is able to provide a comfortable lifestyle for his family. Okonkwo blames Unoka and his laziness and weakness as an oppression, making Okonkwo's chances for recognition and status harder. He sees his father's idle lifestyle as something that is evil.

Therefore, Okonkwo believes that this original ruling patriarch in his life oppresses him. The evil, therefore, forms "out of the cauldron of unsatisfied hatred" (Nietzsche 40). Whereas before, Okonkwo, on the outside, sees that what he achieves and the way he dictates his inferior as good. On the inside, he sees what his father did, or lack thereof, as evil. Thus, in addition to exhibiting the traits of a Nietzschean nobleman externally, he possesses the traits of a man of *ressentiment* internally. Okonkwo's "soul squints" as he tries to hide his spirit, the covert becoming his security (Nietzsche 38). He learns how to be provisionally quiet and humble in order to gain respect, while not allowing himself to forget the wrongs done against him (Nietzsche 38).

Okonkwo resents the life that his father led, which leads him to strive for success and status in

his society, while hating everything that his father loved. This fear is not something external; it lies deep within himself (Achebe 13). Deep-seeded fear, resentment, and bad conscience thus rule his soul and mind, just as it rules the life of the man of *ressentiment*.

While the truly nobleman “lives in trust and openness with himself”, the man of *ressentiment* is neither honest nor straightforward (Nietzsche 38). Likewise, Okonkwo is not totally honest with himself. He believes that the acquisition of titles and power will bring him happiness and respect, yet a bad conscience from his fears of weakness and insecurity plague his soul. While trying to convey himself as strong and powerful to his people, he actually is full of fear and hatred. He kills his adopted son, Ikemefuna, for fear of others thinking him weak (Achebe 61). He pretends to not care about the departure of his son, Nwoye, yet inside he truly becomes distraught, fearing that he is losing control over his domain. Okonkwo’s deep-seeded fear and resentment thus creates struggles within himself. He is not able to overcome these struggles, which eventually causes his downfall as a powerful, prosperous man. On the inside, Okonkwo feels that he has failed as a father as a result of Nwoye’s conversion to Christianity. When the missionaries take away the control that Okonkwo used to have in his village, he gives in to his feelings and takes his own life. Rather than rising above his bad conscience and feelings of resentment, as Nietzsche prefers, Okonkwo becomes “choked with hate” (195). He is not honest with his true feelings and gives in to his insecurities, leading to his suicide.

In his village, Okonkwo, on the outside, is a man who exhibits power and strength in his community. However, he also harbors angry feelings and resentment that lead to his development of a bad conscience. In effect, Chinua Achebe presents Okonkwo, externally, as a

dominating Nietzschean nobleman who defines what is good and right while looking down on those who lead a more unprivileged lifestyle. In addition, Achebe reveals Okonkwo's resentful emotions, leading to his definition of his oppression as evil and his development of a bad conscience, the traits of Nietzsche's man of *ressentiment*. He is unable to overcome these emotions, therefore leading to his demise. As a result, Achebe displays Okonkwo as both the Nietzschean nobleman and the man of *ressentiment*; one aspect externally, the other internally.