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## Tragic Order and Threat of Comedy in *Achebe's Arrow of God*

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### **Abstract**

One very common view of tragedy – often arising from a (mis)reading of Aristotle – is as that which ends in sadness, for which it produces the correct tragic effect on the reader. The implication of this is that the tragic text is identified and is so classified by an unstable feature that is itself outside the text, namely, the feeling of the audience. But the literary text as a self-contained universe proves to depend on nothing external to it for its validity. The tragic myth in particular, as it is represented in literature, is not an effect to be seen at the end; it is inscribed in the text, in the nature of its struggles that determine the very structure of the text. It will hardly be accounted for by the matter of sad feelings, for the saddest point in the text is often surrounded by a comic possibility. This forms the burden of this paper. The intention is to examine Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and through a close reading of the text, demonstrate that rather than wear tragedy as a dress, its very being is tragic; and that at each point of serious crisis, there is a comic threat.

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**Key Words:** *Arrow of God*, Chinua Achebe, tragedy, tragic text/myth and comic possibility/threat

### **Introduction**

'... the highest comedy gains its power from its sense of tragic possibility, and the profoundest tragedy presents a full fleeting vision, through the temporary disorder of an ordered universe to which comedy is witness' (Richard B. Sewall 1).

Since Aristotle, literary texts have been read along two main dimensions – tragedy and comedy. However, some argue that there is a middle ground between the two, but that is not the issue here. Many critics since Aristotle have believed that the genus of tragedy is quite unrelated to that of comedy (*Discourse Analysis* 43). But from Sewall's reading of Socrates as quoted above, the two modes actually emanate from the same source. Discernable from Sewall's treatise and from our reading is that not just can these modes spring from the same source, comedy is a possibility in a tragic play and vice versa. It is against the notions of this thesis that this essay is premised. We shall first look at the questions of tragic end and the analysis of tragedy as a pattern of necessity to rightly situate *Arrow of God* in a wider context of the tragic mode, and then demonstrate that at each major point of decision in the text, both a comic realisation and a tragic one are 'imminent possibility[ies]' (Sewall 6).

### **Tragic End?**

One of the first persons to inaugurate a formal theorising about literature is Aristotle in his seminal work *Poetics*. His methodology was deductive in the extent that he examined the works of those he considered model playwrights of his time and made promulgations about literature from the works of these playwrights. However, as profound as his conclusions about literature were, and still remain, current investigations about literature have sometimes led to standpoints that contrast sharply with the views of Aristotle. For example, Aristotle defines tragedy as:

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an imitation of action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (*Poetics* part iv)

The problem with Aristotle's definition of tragedy seems double-barrelled: one, his position presupposes that to determine whether we are faced with tragedy or something else we have to investigate the feelings of the audience at the end of the play and determine whether the play has succeeded in eliciting the emotions of pity and fear; two, his viewpoint thrusts the reading attention towards the end such that we have to move from beginning to end before we arrive at a decision as to whether the play is tragedy or otherwise. Put in another way, this view seems to suggest that the reader would not know whether he is faced with tragedy or comedy until he has read the play to the end. But evidence from literary works from the classical times to the present point that a play that is tragic or comic is decidedly so from the very first scene or page. As such, the reader would not need to see the action until the end to be able to make up his or her mind about the orientation of action of the work. For example, Greek tragedy is characterised by the presence of the chorus who chant songs in between the action. One of such songs is the *prologos* and another is the *kommos*, and *stasimon* (Akwanya, 'Studies in Drama' n.pag.). The *prologos* which is sung by the chorus as the characters step onto the stage for the first time underlines the fact that the play that is about to unfold is that in which the destiny of some individual is at stake. Further up and in between the action we witness another type of chant – the *kommos* – which equally reinforces the tragic sequence by embedding the movement of necessity and the inescapability of catastrophe. The situation is essentially similar in Shakespeare as seen in the presence of ghosts and witches whose prognostications reveal a sad destiny and a poisoned future. In modern tragedy, the technique of foreshadowing or foreboding has also shown that tragic action begins right from the first few pages. From the time the moon appears in *Arrow of God*, the narrator reports that the moon is as thin as an orphan fed grudgingly by a cruel foster-mother. Again, Ugoye

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remarks that the moon ‘...sits awkwardly – like an evil moon’ (*Arrow of God* 1-2). All these show that the general mood of the text is tragic. We see this in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* as Eugene Achike appears on the scene wearing a grey long robe in the first few pages of the novel. The robe is long and grey, all underlining the metaphor of ageing and death. What it means, therefore, is that the catastrophe that will overtake the protagonist is already suggested here; in fact, it has already taken place as it were. Similarly, in *The Concubine* by Elechi Amadi, Madume stubs his foot against a disused hoe while he is going to pay court to Ihuoma after her husband has passed on. This incident already looks forward to the disaster that will sweep him away. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, the very fact that Okonkwo’s father, Unoka, is thrown into the bush because of his affliction insinuates a poisoned history for the hero himself. All these instances point up that the idea of tragic end which supposes that tragedy takes place at the end of the work is a misconception of the sequence of tragedy.

The crux of our argument here is that meaning is *integrational* as Roland Barthes (86) has informed us. This is manifestly clear in Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, where the catastrophe that will overtake Ezulu’s family and society is already signposted early enough in the narrative. For example, early in the text, we see Ezeulu appraising the stretch and limit of his power as the Chief Priest of Ulu:

No! The Chief Priest of Ulu was more than that, must be more than that. If he should refuse to name the day there should be no festival – no planting and no reaping. But could he refuse? No Chief Priest had ever refused. So it could not be done. He would not dare. Ezeulu was stung to anger by this as though his enemy had spoken it. ‘Take away the dare’ he replied to his enemy (3).

This is a battle taking place in the ‘theatre of consciousness’ (Akwanya and Anohu). But in the course of the narrative, Ezeulu will have an opportunity to test out the reach of his powers by refusing to declare the new moon that ought to herald the year’s harvest. The Chief Priest tells the elders of Umuaro, ‘You all know what the custom is. I only call a new festival when there is only one yam left from the last. Today I have three

yams and so I know the time has not come' (*Arrow of God* 207). The consequence of this confrontation is collapse of the traditional system. But what is more important is the way meaning diffuses through the narrative: what we encounter as a dialogue process in the consciousness of the character actualises towards the end of the work. In other words, what we see at the beginning of the narration already looks forward to the future.

Equally significant is the exchange between Ezeulu and Akubue, where we read:

'I do not doubt that,' said Akubue and, in a sudden access of impatience and recklessness, added, 'but you forget one thing: that no man however great can win judgment against a clan. You may think you did in that land dispute but you are wrong' (131).

Akubue's remark that the community is greater than the individual bodes into the future. By the time Ezeulu's household is overtaken by catastrophe, we are told that 'Ezeulu sank to the ground in utter amazement' and that he 'would have been equal to any pain not compounded with humiliation' (229). It is not so much the death of Obika that causes him pain as the humiliation before the clan. Again it is shown that Akubue's remark already looks forward to the tragedy that will engulf Ezeulu's household and place the Chief Priest at the mercy of the clan, as it were.

Further, Ezeulu's warning to Obika seems to foresee the future of the young man:

It is praiseworthy to be brave and fearless, my son, but sometimes it is better to be a coward. We often stand in the compound of a coward to point at the ruins where a brave man used to live. The man who has never submitted to anything will soon submit to the burial mat (*Arrow of God* 11).

Towards the end of the narration, the narrator tells us 'As soon as he [Ezeulu] saw Obika's body coming in under the eaves he sprang to his feet and took up his matchet' (228). Obika's premature and sudden death is already foreboded in his father's warning. What we are seeing in all this is how meaning spans the whole length and breadth of the text. In other words, to conceptualise tragedy as an event that takes place in a

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particular spot in the work is a misapprehension of the true nature of this particular kind of action.

Indeed there are other instances of utterances in the narrative that are also freighted with meaning implications that spread across the text. For example, Ezeulu says to Akubue 'Have you not heard that when two brothers fight a stranger reaps the harvest' (131). Ezeulu's utterance, on this occasion, appears to be the *hinge point* of the story as it seems to capture the entire narrative in a capsule of thought.

Every strip of the text participates in the meaning of the whole; every thread of meaning interconnects to other elements in the textual process. As such, tragedy does not occur in a specific point in the text, in isolation to the rest of the text. Rather, it intertwines and interpenetrates every nook and cranny of the text. What is more, it would be misleading to situate our appraisal of the action of tragedy on the feelings of the audience. A more sure-footed approach would be to examine the actions and the career of the characters.

### **Tragedy as a Movement of Necessity**

'I've never thought of my characters as being sad. On the contrary, they are full of life. They didn't choose tragedy. Tragedy chose them' - Juliette Binoche

This important quote from Binoche reveals to us that the form of the story dictates a lot about the nature of the actions in it. It goes further to correspond to what Akwanya writes: that the literary work is representation not only of action or thought, but also of the forms themselves (*Discourse Analysis* 8). To know a text is to know it as belonging to a certain form. As we have seen earlier, what makes a text tragic, for instance, is not an event or incident in the story; the text is tragic by reason of its very nature, and everything moves towards the actualisation of this. The tragedy of the text does not so much belong to individual incidents or characters *per se*, but to the sequence.

When we see the incidents, actions and decisions in the work as 'movements of necessity' (Akwanya), we would be better placed to critically examine Ezeulu, for instance, as acting out his own very nature

as a tragic hero and the nature of the sequence. With this, we would not readily join the crowd of critics who say that Ezeulu is the architect of all the troubles in the story, and perhaps see reasons with Damian Opata who argues that 'Ezeulu's actions are removed from the context of blame and irresponsibility' (64). From the classical period, we have known that some of the forces that precipitate the actions of the tragic heroes range from the gods to fate, history and so on. But more than this, the actions in the text are largely determined by the movement of necessity both for the classical and modern tragedies.

Ezeulu's opinion is always pitched against that of the elders of Umuaro. On occasions, he is in agreement with them, at other times he is in disagreement. He never wants to go to Okperi to answer the white man's call. We know that his visit to Okperi is the cause of the delay in his eating the sacred yams, which draws the battle line between him and his people. When he agrees with the elders to go to Okperi, it is a movement of necessity; and when he refuses to eat the yam, it is under the 'rule of necessity' (Akwanya). Hence Christopher Nwodo counsels that '[T]he death of Ezeulu and the collapse of the system that he symbolized should not necessarily be seen as a punishment for his pride. They are all part of a process' (53); they are all part of the 'systems of necessity with which the characters are constantly colliding, becoming entangled in their movements, and as a result, the experiencers of their implications...' (*Discourse Analysis* 306). Obviously, in all the major decision points in the story – the war with Okperi, the visit to Okperi, the eating of the yams, etc. – it would appear that his decisions are his, but as we are told in the text, Ezeulu must do what Ulu calls him to do. In what follows, we shall see that Ezeulu is not at liberty, as much as many think, to follow any course of action.

### **Threat of Comedy in *Arrow of God***

The account of literature as something that could be known by different features according to the region of its origin is obviously responsible for studies that view tragedy as appearing very differently across the literary ages, where in each age, the tragic text is tragic by different features, obviously lacking in that of the other ages, as if no property is

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found to be common to all art forms so named. In Chinyere Nwahunanya, for instance, we read concerning modern tragedy, that [i]n contrast ... to the universe of classical and Shakespearian tragedy, in modern tragedy the events which cause tragedy are established before the tragic victim is born into them. Man only enters into this world to suffer for a catastrophe of which he is not a cause; it is a universe that breeds transmissible or inherited catastrophe (*Tragedy* 8).

Earlier on, he had quoted Draper as saying that

[w]hen one takes a view of the whole tragic tradition from Aristotle to the present day, it becomes quite apparent that tragedy does alter its shape and meaning from one century to another with chameleon variability, reinforcing the sense that a single, unchanging definition of tragedy is unattainable (2).

But the question that must be asked is whether the constantly changing 'shape' and 'meaning' affects the fundamental nature of tragedy as a literary mode, by reason of which all the works of this kind from all the ages cohere in archival kinship where what is actually reinforced is the fact that all are products of the same tradition, the same mode of being. For one wonders if a definition is worth attempting for tragedy if it implies that we must, at the dawn of every new century, produce a new definition for tragedy. How, indeed, is one to connect the modern tragic texts to their ancestors, if each is to be apprehended by a set of disparate features? In other words, if tragedy changes its form and meaning from one century to another, where then lies its essence on which basis all the texts so-called are so designated? For while it is true that the content of tragic texts in the modern era has drastically changed from its classical models, it appears obvious that tragedy all over the world, and indeed all over the ages, is the history of human suffering. For as Sewall teaches, it

is the sense of ancient evil, of 'the blight man was born for,' of the permanence of the mystery of human suffering, that is basic to the tragic sense of life. It informs all literature of a sombre cast – the dirge, the lament, the melancholy lyric or song, the folk ballad of betrayal



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and death. It colours many scenes in the great epics and hovers about the best comedies as an imminent possibility (6).

This 'blight man was born for, and the permanence of the mystery of human suffering, that is basic to the tragic sense of life' appears to be the one essence that marks all great tragic texts, from *Oedipus Rex* to *Riders to the Sea*, and from *Death of a Salesman* to *Death and the King's Horseman*. And it is not a thing the text wears on its sleeves as a garment, nor is it a particular action of the hero performed at a certain point in the text, as implied by Bernth Lindfors (qtd in Nwahunanya, *Tragedy* 183), when he says that "the elders came to regard Ezeulu as a man who brought tragedy upon himself." As it is, whatever Ezeulu has done is only incidental and necessary for the fulfilment of the text as tragedy. In Nwahunanya's conception, tragedy is a *thing* which is 'caused' by events that are well established before the tragic victim is born into them. But evidence from texts that have been designated tragic shows, just as we saw earlier in this discussion, that tragedy as a literary form is not a thing caused by events which the tragic victim is born into; it is not a thing separated from events that cause it; it is a mode of being. The tragic text does not first emerge as events whose aim is to cause tragedy, the events themselves (whatever that means) emerge as tragic, with their appurtenances.

This brings us to the issue we have already seen in Sewall above, the fact that tragedy 'hovers over the best comedies as an imminent possibility', and that indeed (for us in this study), comedy is also a constant threat in the gloomiest of tragedies. This factor, perhaps more than any other, marks out the tragic hero and establishes the text really as a tragic one. The threat is seen most clearly in *Arrow of God* when the elders of the land ask Ezeulu to eat the sacred yam. Anichebe Udeozo who speaks on behalf of the elders of Umuaro says: 'Umuaro is now asking you to go and eat those remaining yams today and name the day of the next harvest' (208). Many of Umuaro people think that Ezeulu has been presented with options, such that he is at liberty to choose. And this is one incident on account of which many critics hold Ezeulu responsible for the woes of the people and for his tragedy.

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In Nwahunanya, for instance, we read that “[i]t is not uncommon to come across critics who absolve Ezeulu of a crime he purposely committed (or is it not criminal and callous to starve a whole clan under false pretences?).” In the text, however, we note that the lines of the tragic necessities are already drawn at this point. The confusion of the elders of Umuaro which Ofoka said was responsible for asking Ezeulu to go by himself and answer the white man had produced its fruit. Ezeulu’s detention at Okperi has further moved the sequence of events to a point of inevitable crisis, such that what remains to be seen is how the events marking the crisis are to unfold. And though it provided Ezeulu an opportunity to avenge his abandonment by Umuaro, it is not as if he has other options, for he is not actually in charge.

Umuaro has never witnessed this kind of dilemma in their existence as a people and so there is no antecedent solution to fall back on. What they know very well, however, is that they brought the god Ulu and installed its priest to serve them. It is therefore a question of whether man is made for god or god is made for man. So Anichebe Udeozo has said to Ezeulu,

... listen to what I am going to say. Umuaro is now asking you to go and eat those sacred yams today and name the day of the next harvest. Do you hear me well? I said go and eat those yams today, not tomorrow; and if Ulu says we have committed an abomination let it be on the heads of the ten of us here. *You will be free because we have set you to it, and the person who sets a child to catch a shrew should also find him water to wash the odour from his hands. We shall find you the water* (208, emphasis added).

The position taken here by the ten elders representing Umuaro is not lost on Ezeulu, being that it is the basis of his eternal enmity with Nwaka of Umunneora, and indeed, the primordial issue that has placed Ezeulu in perpetual fighting mood. Neither Ezidemili nor Nwaka has ever spared any opportunity to speak about it. In one of the instances, the former had captured it thus: ‘Every boy in Umuaro knows that Ulu was made by our fathers long ago. But Idemili was there at the beginning of things. Nobody made it’ (41). It is this ancient argument that has directly or

indirectly sustained the tragic sequence *Arrow of God*, it is this same argument that the ten elders have so eloquently re-enacted here. Ezeulu's resistance to it earlier in the community meetings where he had to argue seriously with Ogbuefi Nwaka, and the people's inability to make up their mind about which way to go is what has kept the text on the tragic plane. For had the people decided that Ulu was their making and should obey them, the mystery which Ezeulu, and indeed the people perceive around him would have been long gone, thus keeping the text on the comic plane.

So when Ezeulu responds to the elders, it is to tell them that "I am the Chief Priest of Ulu and what I have told you is his will not mine" (208). Thus while Umuaro now perceives Ulu as their possession which must do their bidding or be discarded, Ezeulu sees the people as subjects of Ulu, and himself as accountable, first, to Ulu, and then to the people. For this reason, Ezeulu's response to the suggestion that he eat the sacred yams is that 'what you ask me to do is not done.... You are asking me to eat death' (207). This calls to mind Karl Jaspers explication of the tragic cause as a 'boundary situation' and Draper's argument that the tragic function is found with the courage with which the hero faces the tragic situation. Because it is a tragic sequence, the courage to face the tragedy is certain. Otherwise the story would be on the comic plane.

Umuaro's attempt to make Ulu subject to their will and not the other way round is the very attempt at switching the sequence to the comic plane, where the crisis in the text appears as man-made and therefore redeemable by man. It is this comic threat that Ezeulu resists with all his might, even if it means moving against the entire people of Umuaro. Of course the tragedy is his, and not anyone else's. He has come to his boundary situation, where the essential issue of *being* is to be settled. His insistence, therefore, on proceeding according to custom, instead of violating the sacred yam ritual in order to avoid suffering, against all humanly reasonable pleas from his people, brings him out as a kind of Prometheus, except that he has no foreknowledge of what is to follow. He is under a kind of necessity which he is not in control of, though he thinks he is in charge. If then Ezeulu is found guilty of evil for his refusal

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to heed the demand of Umuaro as expressed by the elders, his misdeed is nothing else but being a tragic hero.

### Conclusion

Nwahunanya identifies what he calls the 'central element of human freedom and responsibility' in tragedy (*Literary Criticism* 171). This appears to be the path walked by many critics – that the tragic hero has the liberty to choose the course of his actions. It is obvious that these options of choice present themselves, but the question that this paper raises is whether the nature of the tragic allows him the option of choice. Even though M. M. Mahood argues that '[I]n the end he [Ezeulu] chooses to risk the destruction of his people', he adds immediately that his was 'no less a tragic choice' (204). By way of conclusion, the point we are making here is that the tragic hero is always already constrained, and what critics see as option or choice before the hero is really no choice at all; if anything it is make-believe. And the presence of 'choice' or 'option' before the hero does not signify that it is in the power of the hero to reverse the direction of the action. Indeed in a tragic action, comedy can only threaten to upturn the movement of events, a threat that will never be realised. Also, the literary work can be realised as tragedy or comedy: whatever it is, it is the form of the work, and not an incident or an accident that takes place at a certain point in the text.

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