

## Modernity vs. Tradition in “Dead Men’s Path” by Chinua Achebe

Two Part Title  
1. Provides the Title of the Work  
2. Addresses the Essay Question  
(presents the theme of the text)

Introduction  
Paragraph

Tradition starts with a seed and expands to grow luscious branches and girthy roots. Its growth permits it to not only increase in strength but to also inhabit nearby lands. As it continues to prosper in the lavish soil, its intertwining foundation makes it close to unbreakable. From a seed to a full-grown tree, tradition plants itself in people around the world.

Hook:  
Introduces the central topic of the chosen work in a general manner.

However, at times the roots become so expansive that there is scarcely room for new life to grow resulting in great conflict between the new and the old. Outside the world of metaphor, as progressive movements are multiplying across our globe, we see a cultural clash between traditional values and progressive (modern) beliefs. People believe only one side of the argument can be valid, when in truth we should strive for a civil balance.

Summary of  
Short Story

This conundrum likely inspired Nigerian author Chinua Achebe to write his short story “Dead Men’s Path.” His narrative depicts how life in a small Nigerian village is upended by the arrival of a new school

Includes:  
setting, name of the main character(s), conflict.

headmaster. The headmaster, Michael Obi, wishes to modernize the school at great cost to the ancient traditions of the villagers resulting in a conflict that is painful for both sides. Nevertheless, in short story “Dead

Thesis  
Statement

Men’s Path,” Chinua Achebe uses **setting (B1)**, **symbolism (B2)** and **conflict (B3)** to prove that not maintaining a healthy balance between tradition and modern values will lead to the destruction of one’s identity.

Body  
Paragraph #1

To begin, the **setting** of the short story is that of a small village school meant to teach a healthy balance of the **traditional** Nigerian/Igbo beliefs and **modern** knowledge to the village’s school children. However,

Topic  
Sentence/  
Statement

Michael Obi, the new headmaster has other ideas of what a school should be. He states, “*the school shall be a place of beauty*” (2), and “*everything will be just modern and delightful*” (1). Later, he states that he refuses to allow exploration of the village’s beliefs and rituals, stating instead that his “*duty is to teach [the] children to laugh at such ideas*” (3).

Context +  
Quoted  
Evidence

Explanation

Generally speaking, a school is a place of education, where young people are expected to gain knowledge in an unbiased manner while

safely exploring their own identities. Moreover, teachers are meant to be unbiased in their opinions and serve as gentle guides for their students. However, Michael Obi subverts the traditional idea of a school with his own agenda. He chooses to focus on creating “beauty” on his school grounds, rather than embracing what already exists. Furthermore, he does not honour the traditional values of the villagers and their children. Instead he uses his position of power as headmaster to promote only his personal progressive ideas. Even going so far as to encourage the students to “laugh” at their own traditional beliefs and rituals. **By doing this, and using the school setting, he oppresses the villagers' traditional beliefs, and prevents them from fully exploring all aspects of their identity.**

Concluding Sentence

Body Paragraph #2

Topic Sentence/ Statement

Context + Quoted Evidence

Explanation

Concluding Sentence

“Dead Men's Path” then uses **symbolism** through the fence and barbed wire to represent the oppression of the villagers' traditions – and more importantly their identity. As mentioned above, Michael Obi, is the oppressive new headmaster of the village school, who believes the village must move towards more modern practices. As a means of limiting the villagers' traditional religious practices, he builds a fence around the footpath that has been historically used for birth and death rituals. The narrator illustrates Michael Obi's harsh and unforgiving actions in the following description: *“heavy sticks were planted closely across the path at the two places where it entered and left the school premises. These were further strengthened by barbed wire”* (2). Later to justify his choice when the villagers begin to protest his actions, Michael Obi states, *“the whole purpose of our school... is to eradicate just such beliefs... Dead men do not require footpaths”* (3). The fence is meant to show the “heavy” level of authority and power that Michael Obi feels he has over the villagers, as he literally controls their ability to practice their ancient rituals. The added barbed wire is meant to serve as a warning of potential harm for any that attempt to challenge Obi's decision. Barbed wire is dangerous, inflexible, and sharp, showing Obi's lack of mercy in asserting his own harsh beliefs, and his willingness to cut down the beliefs of the villagers. Thus, the **symbolism** of the barbed wire fence is responsible for intensifying the conflict between both parties in the village, and creating a terrible imbalance in whose identity is represented in the village overall.

Body  
Paragraph #3

Topic  
Sentence/  
Statement

Context +  
Quoted  
Evidence

Explanation

Concluding  
Sentence

Conclusion  
Paragraph

Restatement  
of Thesis

Summary  
of Essay

Finally, the central **conflict** in the story is brought to life by a clash between Michael Obi and the village priest, who debate whether the two groups can exist peacefully. After Michael Obi closes the path, the village Priest named Ani, comes to reason with him on behalf of the entire village. He states, *"this path was here before you were born and before your father was born. The whole life of the village depends on it. Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it... if you re-open the path we shall have nothing to quarrel about"* (3). When Michael Obi refuses his plea, the priest continues, *"what I always say is: let the hawk perch and the eagle perch"* (3). While Michael Obi stands firmly in the belief that the only correct path for the village is a move away from the traditional rituals of the village, the villagers believe the two can peacefully coexist. The priest attempts to appeal to Michael Obi the level of importance of the path and explains to him what it is used for and how integral it is to the "life" and survival of the villagers' identity. However, when that doesn't work he attempts to remind Michael Obi of the value of compromise. He believes that two powerful creatures, such as a hawk and an eagle, may perch next to each peacefully. Thus, suggesting that respecting the power and beauty of one being, does not diminish the power and beauty of other. However, Michael Obi only continues to ignore the priest's appeals and the **conflict** results in many in the village suffering with the loss of their connection to their traditional practices.

Overall, Chinua Achebe proves that a healthy balance between tradition and modernity is integral to the survival of one's identity through the use of setting, symbolism and conflict. The **setting** provides an accessible and familiar backdrop for the complex clash of modern and traditional values. It also encourages readers to challenge what they understand about education-based environments. The **symbolism** through the heavy picket fence, and the harsh barbed wire allows the reader to visualize the cruel manner in which we attempt to dominate or persecute those we disagree with. Then finally, the use of **conflict** exemplifies the painful outcomes that result when one attempts to oppress older cultures and traditions. While the author attempts to highlight that tradition is an important part of our identity, he also does not

Extension

discredit that progress is not also an integral part of growth. In the end, the story brings to life a struggle that extends beyond the world of the small Nigerian village we see in the story. Achebe's lesson is especially important as we move into a time period full of continual and rapid progress. We can move at the speed we wish, but must also respect those who feel more comfortable in their traditional values; even if they may clash with our own. After all, while the roots may be entangled beneath the Earth, there is likely room in the branches above for both the hawk and the eagle to perch together.

**Works Cited:**

Achebe, Chinua. "Dead Men's Path." 1953.