Wole Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman

*Death and the King's Horseman* by Wole Soyinka

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**Author's Life**

Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka was born in western Nigeria on July 13th, 1934. His parents were Christians, but were both from different Yoruba groups. In Nigeria Soyinka was exposed to both Western and Yoruba cultures. In 1960 Nigeria gained its independence and Soyinka returned to Nigeria, where he absorbed as much Yoruba culture as possible. In 1965 and 1967 Soyinka was arrested for criticizing the government over the radio and in print. Some of his plays are pointed at corrupt African leaders, but plays such as *Death and the King's Horseman* examines the culture in Nigeria at the time and its weakness, forgetfulness of traditions, and lack of duty. In 1968 he became the first writer from Africa to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

**Yoruba Culture**

The Yoruba are a large African ethnic group that is made up of a collection of diverse people brought together by a common language, history, and culture. They have many rituals and ceremonies, such as the egungun ceremony and accompanying dress mentioned in the play. A video of the garb and the dance can be seen [here](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-16482216). In 1893, the kingdoms of the Yoruba in Nigeria were added to the Protectorate of Great Britain. Nigeria was a British colony up until 1960, and then on October 1st Nigeria gained its independence structured as a federation of states.
Characters

Elesin Oba

Elesin Oba, known as a man of great vitality, was the chief horseman of the dead king, he lived a life of luxury, but knows that now that the king has been dead for a month he is expected to commit ritual suicide. We see him on his last day on earth demand a woman who is already engaged and takes her to bed, although being warned. He is prevented from committing the ritual act, for which his son Olunde commits suicide in Elesin's place, and upon seeing his dead son’s body strangles himself with his chains.

Amusa

Amusa is an African serving the native administration police. He is not trusted by the British officer Simon Pilkings, and is also not trusted by the villagers for working with the British. Although converted to Christianity, he still has much respect for his native beliefs. He rebukes Simon for dishonoring his native culture, but follows orders to prevent Elesin’s suicide.

Iyoloja

Iyoloja is the spokesperson of the women in the village, and serves as a voice of wisdom. Although she warns against Elesin taking the bride in order to preserve his duty, she hands her over knowing it is Elesin's last day on this earth. She is worried that he will leave behind a cursed pregnancy, and reminds him of this when bringing Olunde to Elesin in his cell, and tells the bride to think of the unborn.

Simon Pilkings

Simon Pilkings is the British district officer in the play. He has disdain for the Yoruba and the Yoruba culture. He is very sure of his way of life, and dismisses things he does not understand. He arrests Elesin on the night the prince is there, not to save Elesin, but to prevent trouble on the night of the ball. By trying to preserve peace, he actually causes much more trouble.

Olunde
Elesin’s son, who returns to the village and sees that his father has not completed the sacred ritual which he was bound to by honor. Olunde is disgusted and tells Elesin that he is no son of his. Olunde then takes his own life in his father’s place, which consequently leads to Elesin committing suicide himself.

Death and the King’s Horseman Synopsis

Act I

“Death and the King’s Horseman” begins with Elesin Oba walking through a market at the end of the business day. He is followed by praise-singers, and talks to the praise singer Olohun-iyo about the importance of this day, as he is enjoying his last day on earth. He is flirted with by many women, but catches sight of a women who is already engaged. He demands to take her to bed, as Iyaloja warns him not to forget his duty.

Act II

Act II takes place over the same evening as Act I, at the house of Simon Pilkings, who is a British officer. As he dances with his wife, Amusa, who is working for the British, is insulted that Simon and his wife are wearing traditional egungun ceremonial clothes and will not speak to them until they take them off. Amusa explains that Elesin will be committing ritual suicide that night. As the prince will be arriving, Simon orders Elesin to be arrested so he cannot complete the ritual because he does not want any trouble.

Act III

In Act III we return to the market of Act I. One of the market stalls has been converted into a wedding chamber. As two British constables arrive to arrest Elesin, the women hurl insults at them and send them away. Elesin shows Iyaloja the cloth that proves the bride was a virgin. As he readies to die, he hears the drumming and knows it is almost his turn. He falls into a hypnotic state and dances.

Act IV

Act IV begins with the prince showing up for the ball, admires the Pilkings’ egungun attire, and begins to dance. Simon informs a resident officer of the ritual Elesin is about to undergo, and they agree to try and stop it and Simon hurries to the market place. Elesin’s son Olunde rebukes Jane for the egungun attire, and knows the ritual his father is about to undergo and goes to find Simon to stop him from interfering. Elesin is interfered with, accuses the British for bringing him shame, and when Olunde sees him, he claims he has no father and walks away.

Act V

Act V takes place in Elesin’s prison cell. He tells Simon that because he was not allowed to complete his ritual there will never be peace in the world again. Iyoloja comes to Elesin, and tells him that it is not the fault of the British, but of his own for being distracted by the bride. She brings him the body of Olunde and shows him that he killed himself in his father’s place. Upon seeing his son’s corpse, Elesin strangles himself with his own chains. The bride does her duty and is informed by Iyoloja that she should forget the dead and the living, and think of the unborn.

Themes

Circle of Life

The Yoruba believe that life follows along a continuum, the dead are not forgotten as ancestors are honored. The unborn are also cherished, as we see Iyoloja point out that we should give our thoughts to the unborn. The most important transition one makes in the culture is the transition from life into death. This is clearly seen as Elesin makes his way through the market before his ritual suicide, which will remind the village about life being on a continuum. They think of death in a completely traditional and ritual manner.

Clashing Cultures

The two cultures, the British and the Yoruba, are clearly at odds throughout the play. We see simple non-confrontational clashing, such as the Pilkings listen to tango as the ritual drumming of the Yoruba is heard outside. During the night of Elesin’s ritual suicide the British are holding a fancy dress up ball with the prince in attendance, these examples are to show the stark difference in what each culture values, but we then see disrespect. The Pilkings do not understand, and do not care to understand, the Yoruba culture and practices. We see the first blatant disrespect as they are wearing sacred egungun dress to their fancy ball. Amusa and Olunde point out the disrespect, but they ignore it. In view of religion, Elesin believes truly in his faith, while Simon shows he does not have much respect for his Christianity.
Duty

Duty is a major theme throughout the play. As the King’s chief horseman, Elesin knows that he will follow his king into death and considers himself a man of great honor. He even claims that he is eagerly awaiting his death and will not be distracted. This holds to be not true, as he is tempted by the bride and tries to become more attached to the world he is about to depart. As he is distracted, this gives Simon an opportunity to prevent Elesin from conducting his ritual suicide. Elesin, as an honorable man, should not have been prevented from committing his sacred rite and duty. Olunde, Elesin’s son, is so ashamed of his father that he refutes their relationship, and gives his own life in return.

Common Play Themes

Temptation and its Repercussions

When Elesin is being paraded through the market the afternoon before his ritual suicide, he spies an engaged woman whom he lusts after. He takes her to bed, despite Iyoloja’s warning not to be distracted from his duty. It is this physical temptation that Iyoloja claims was the reason Elesin was unable to complete his sacred rite. The fallout from this was Elesin’s son Olunde committing suicide, with Elesin following suit. The physical temptation of a woman and the ensuing distraction from duty is a theme seen in many plays.

Suicide

The story is structured around a ritual suicide to begin with, which sets the tone and foreshadows future events. We have a *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*-like ending to the play, with Olunde committing suicide due to his father’s lack of duty to his rite. When he learns of his son’s actions, Elesin strangles himself with chains. It is a very Shakespeare-esque ending to the story, and reminiscent of the tragic endings often seen.

References


