Death and the King’s Horseman

Death and the King’s Horseman - Wole Soyinka (1975)

Death and the King’s Horseman, a tragedy written by Wole Soyinka in 1975, shares an interpretation of the Yoruba religion and the unique view of the universe. In the Yoruba tradition, there are three worlds: the living, the dead, and the unborn. Soyinka’s play centers upon the interconnectivity between the three worlds and the way in which actors from the different worlds interact.

Plot Summary

Scene 1

As per Yoruba custom, when the chief of the community dies, Elesin Oba, the king’s horseman, must commit ritual suicide to ensure the chief’s spirit makes its way to the afterlife. Otherwise, the chief’s spirit will travel about Earth and wreak havoc upon the community. If the horseman does not die, this is a grave sign of disrupting the cosmic balance.

As the chief has just died, Act I follows Elesin Oba dancing and chanting through the market with his praise singers and drummers. Since it is his last day on Earth, Elesin Oba is given the privilege of any woman in the market place. He asks for a beautiful bride who is meant to marry Iyaloja’s son. After some convincing, Iyaloja accepts Elesin’s request and he is allowed a night with the bride.

Scene 2
Sergeant Amusa, a muslim, enters the home of District Officer, Simon Pilkings, to find him and his wife, Jane dancing while dressed in traditional Yoruba clothing. Amusa instructs them as to how disrespectful this act is to the Yoruba people. Amusa is shaken by the level of disrespect and unable to formulate sentences, decides to leave a note explaining the ritual Elesin is meant to before that night. The note is lost in translation and Pilkings does not completely understand what will be happening until further clarification from his servant, Joseph. Pilkings, a British colonial officer, intervenes with the ritual and tells Amusa to arrest Elesin to prevent him from committing suicide.

Scene 3

When Amusa arrives at the marketplace with a few constables to stop Elesin from engaging in the ritual, the women taunt them and force them to retreat without success. Elesin emerges from his chamber after consummating his marriage to the beautiful bride. The night continues with much singing and dancing in the marketplace.

Scene 4

At a masked ball at a British resident’s home, Pilkings receives word that Elesin was not successfully stopped. The resident admonishes Pilkings for not dealing with the matter properly. With Amusa still troubled by the sight of Simon’s manner of dress, Pilkings’ leaves to intervene with the ritual on his own.

Jane meets with Olunde, Elesin’s son who Simon helped travel to England for medical school. Jane and Olunde converse and Jane quickly realizes, much to her surprise, that Olunde has adopted a much more critical view of British culture and still very much believes in the Yoruba way of life. Olunde has come to fulfill his duty of burying his father since hearing the Chief died and knowing Elesin will be next. Jane is shocked that Olunde is not phased by the thought of his father’s death and does not wish to save him.

The sounds of the drums change and Olunde assumes this means Elesin has been killed. When Pilkings returns, Olunde attempts to explain to him that it is for the betterment of the community that Elesin die and is pleased that Pilkings was not able to obstruct the cosmic order.

Upon finding an angry Elesin captured, Olunde is ashamed of his father for not completing his duty. He tells Elesin he no longer has a father and storms away.

Scene 5

An imprisoned Elesin is troubled that he was unable to complete his duty since he is still fully committed to the task. He thinks through the recent events wondering whether to attribute his failure to the consummation of his marriage or the cosmos failing him.

Jane enters with Pilkings and convinces him to allow Iyaloja to speak with Elesin. Iyaloja and Elesin speak about the implications of his failure. Then the women bring in a cloth covered figure which Iyaloja uncovers to reveal Olunde’s dead body. Shamed by his father’s inability to complete his duty, Olunde sacrificed himself instead. Elesin reacts by strangling himself with his chains.

Iyaloja condemns Pilkings for misunderstanding and disrespecting the Yoruba tradition and blames him for how recent events have unfolded. She admonishes him for his last act of ignorance in trying to close Elesin’s eyes. As per Yoruba custom, Iyaloja calls over the bride to close and put dirt on Elesin’s eyelids.

Wole Soyinka’s Biography

Wole Soyinka is a Nigerian playwright and political activist who famously won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986.

Wole Soyinka graduated from Government College and University College in Ibadan in 1958 and then received a degree in English from the University of Leeds in England. He wrote his first play for the Nigerian independence celebrations, entitled A Dance of the Forests in 1960 and founded a theater company to perform it in 1963.

He attended Churchill College, Cambridge as a fellow in the 1970s where he would often walk past a statue of Winston Churchill, the figure of British colonialism. Upon seeing the statue, he says: "I had an overwhelming desire," he says, smiling, "to push it and watch it crash." Soyinka attributes this as the spark which lit the fuse for the many plays, novels, and poems he has authored since.

Even though his writing has largely been politically inspired in the past, he says if he had the choice, he admires those writers who remain in the purely creative realm.

In representing his piece on stage, Soyinka strongly cautions against a reductionist understanding of his play as simply “a clash of cultures”. In a similarly critical fashion, when directing his own production of Death and the King’s Horseman he reminded his cast of African American actors that they actually knew nothing about African culture and could not replicate the dance techniques. “He says, had to "break their bodies into little pieces and then put them back together" before they learned how to move like Yoruba Nigerians.”

Soyinka says he most identifies with the Yoruba deity, Ogun, who is the god of metals and poetry. He has been inspired by Ogun who Soyinka claims is a “demanding God”. Ogun is highly revered in Oyo, the city where Death and the King’s Horseman takes place. Ogun is believed to have been one of the first Gods to come to Earth and successively fought for the safety of its people.
British Colonial History

In 1893, the Yoruba kingdoms in Nigeria became part of the Protectorate of Great Britain. The British imperialists united many different groups within the Yoruba people and other ethnic and linguistic groups. Until 1960 Nigeria was a British colony and the Yoruba were British subjects. On October 1, 1960, Nigeria became an independent nation structured as a federation of states. The colonizers left their stamp on Nigeria by slowly dissolving Yoruba religious practices and spreading Christianity. Soyinka presents this slow process of marginalizing the Yoruba way of life in the play as the British officers intervene and arrest Elesin to prevent him from completing his ritual suicide after the king’s death.

Yoruba Culture

The Yoruba are a collection of diverse groups of people and they are one of the largest African ethnic groups south of the Sahara Desert. Yoruba practices are centered upon much ritual and behavioral symbolism. In Nigeria, they dominate the western part of the country. Particularly relevant to the context of this play is the role of the Yoruba during the centuries of the slave trade. The Yoruba territory was known as the Slave Coast where large numbers of the Yoruba were carried to the Americas.
Language

Yoruba culture is fascinating and their language especially is crucial to the way in which Death and The King’s Horseman has been written. The language is a tonal one which means that the same combination of vowels and consonants can have different meanings depending on the pitch of the vowels (whether they are pronounced with a high voice or a low voice). This fact not only makes the play an interesting one to perform but also means that there are areas where reading the play is a very different experience to watching it being performed especially (as has been the case with many western productions of the play) when actors are not well aware of the Yoruba language and the importance of tonal variations. Soyinka has often stated that no actor can accurately do justice to the characters of this play due to the very difficult task of depicting the language and culture.

Masks

Masks are an aspect of Yoruba culture that is not very well understood by the outside world but form a major part of the play as well as Yoruba life to date. Traditionally and historically the masks have very different purposes and are specifically designed for these varying causes. Masks are sculptured and/or carved art pieces made out of wood, brass and occasionally terracotta. They are often worn by traditional healers and are believed to drive away evil spirits. Often masks are placed on shrines and in temples to honor the gods and ancestors. Often these masks are used in traditional ceremonies where they are worn during performances and spiritual acts. When not worn, these masks are kept in shrines where they are honored with libations and prayers. In the play, masks play a central role in demonstrating British ignorance and misunderstanding of the Yoruba people. The British officer Pilkings and his wife Jane do not understand the religious significance of these masks and offend Amusa when they choose to "tango" while wearing death masks.

Sculptures

There are several kinds of sculptures and art forms that the Yoruba consider important and that are at the heart of their culture and traditions.

Once such example is the Ibeji which refers to twins whose birth among the Yoruba is unusually frequent. An Ibeji statuette is made, if one twin dies. In the event of such an occurrence, this Ibeji remained with the surviving twin and was treated, fed, and washed as a living child. Their effigies, made on the instructions of the oracle, are among the most numerous of all classes of African sculpture and can be found very frequently in anthropology and historical collections all over the world.

The equestrian figure is another common theme in Yoruba wood sculpture. It reflects the importance of the cavalry in the campaigns of the kings who created the Oyo Empire as early as the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Since only Yoruba chiefs and their personal retainers were privileged to use the horse, the rider and the horse remained an important social symbol and offered an exciting subject for artists. Soyinka demonstrates this importance through the main character Elesin who is revered throughout the community as the king’s horseman.

Themes

Life and Death
The opposing force of life and death is a major theme in the play. The entire text is concerned with the journey from one state of being (life) to the next (death) and Elesin’s failure is that he is unable to cross the bridge between these two worlds. For the Yoruba, death is another state of existence, transition into which is only natural and part of the circular cycle of being. Soyinka represents the circular cycle of being when the ritual is completed with death but another life is formed through the pregnancy of Elesin’s young bride. Apart from the Yoruba, the British are also concerned with the theme of life and death - but for them, life is what one should aspire to while death is frightening because it signifies the end of one’s journey. Throughout the play, Soyinka depicts them as struggling to understand the very different Yoruba outlook on life and death and it is this central misunderstanding which drives the story’s conflict.

**Sacrifice**

Ritual and tradition are very important throughout the play but the theme of sacrifice is particularly relevant. For instance, only through Elesin sacrificing himself can the ritual be completed and the cosmic balance be restored. Elesin struggles with this as he attempts to enjoy his last day of life before being stopped by the British imperialists. Ultimately, Olunde’s sacrifice of taking his own life is what restores harmony and order, making sacrifice central to the resolution of the play. This perspective on sacrifice is also important because it is incredibly unique and different from Christianity’s view of sacrifice. The British view the Yoruba people’s sacrifice as a monstrous act because in Christianity sacrifice or suicide is a grave sin. Therefore, it is difficult for Pilkings and Jane to understand and accept that sacrifice might be an appropriate way to die.

**Honor**

Honor is a major, dominant, and overarching theme in the play. Honor is a word that surrounds the actions of the tribal members of the Yoruba, especially with respect to customs, traditions, and rituals. Particularly, in Olunde’s interactions with Pilkings and his wife, Jane, we see honor, dignity and respect for his culture and traditions really come to light. He honors and defends the Yoruba way of life while conversing with an ignorant, Jane. Ultimately, Olunde feels a grave need to honor his father as well as the community and carry out the ritual suicide that his father has been unable to do. Additionally, Elesin must honor his community as well as uphold his own honor by carrying out the ritual suicide which ensures the king’s soul may rest peacefully. Not only would this compromise his honor, but it would also upset the cosmic order and jeopardize the future of his community.

**Anti-colonialism**

European imperialism is present in the play from the beginning to end and there is a constant struggle between the western rulers and the local Yoruba people both culturally and politically. Elesin and Pilkings represent this theme perfectly where they both have duties and responsibilities towards the people but have a very different outlook and relationship with the local population. Pilkings’s duty is to enforce the laws of the English colonial empire in Africa, which means not allowing the supposedly “barbaric” customs like the king’s horseman ritual to continue. The clash between Olunde and Jane further represents British opposition to Yoruba values. While Jane expects Olunde to have assimilated and adopted the British culture and worldview, Olunde instead argues in favor of Yoruba customs and openly accepts his father’s imminent death. Although Olunde attempts to explain the Yoruba point of view, the British continue to demonstrate a stubborn unwillingness to understand a different way of life.

The play also presents the theme of anti-colonialism by highlighting the impact the imperials can have on a culture. It was important for Soyinka to explicate that Yoruba culture is something that is ever changing and evolving. It is not stagnant and “stuck in the past” as the British colonizers have perceived it. Simply because the culture is unlike that of British civilization does not mean that the Yoruba people are somehow backwards or uncivilized. Instead, they have adopted a way of life which was born of a different way of thinking about and perceiving the world.

**Drama and Performance**

It is important to note that Soyinka’s work is first and foremost a play meant to be performed on the stage. Much has been written about the especially difficult nature of performing this play due to the incorporation of traditional Yoruba culture. Play directors are largely unfamiliar with the style of dance, song, and dress and find it difficult to translate this into modes of theater. While the piece is a play and written to be performed, Soyinka’s careful use of diction demonstrates that he did put a lot of time and effort into writing this piece. Hence, this piece is also celebrated as a work of literature.

A scene from one rendition of the play can be viewed here.
References