

Death and the King's Horsemen Study Guide

Death and the King's Horsemen by Wole Soyinka

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Plot Summary

Wole Soyinka's play, "Death and the King's Horseman", is based on actual events occurring in British-occupied Nigeria. The play focuses around the duty of Elesin, the King's Horseman, to commit suicide in the wake of the King's death the month before. It is the duty of British Colonial District Officer Simon Pilkings to stop him. Cheered and egged on by his friends and fellow Yoruba tribesmen and women, Elesin knows it is his duty to die, so that he can guide the King in the afterlife. Pilkings and the British consider the act barbaric and illegal. They consider all life sacred, so they aim to stop him.

Elesin's last day on Earth is enjoyable, as he marries a young girl for his last earthly pleasure. But, his will to die weakens because of this, and he does not want to die. Pilkings' entry gives Elesin a way out. Elesin is arrested, and he blames his misfortunes on everyone, but ultimately comes to accept responsibility that he has shirked his own duty. In order to save the honor of the household and the tribe, Elesin's son Olunde commits suicide in his father's place. Stricken with shame and grief, Elesin commits suicide using his prison chains.



Author's Note - Scene 1

Summary

Author's Note

Wole Soyinka sets the stage for his play "Death and the King's Horseman" in his author's note preceding the play. He explains that the play takes place in the ancient city of Yoruba in Nigeria, in 1946. It is inspired by true events between Elesin, the King's Horseman, his son, and the Colonial District Officer.

Soyinka cautions the reader against the reductionist tendency of ascribing events to the overused theme of "clash of cultures". He describes this as a prejudicial thing, because it assumes there is equality in every given situation or instance between the alien and indigenous cultures. Soyinka encourages focus rather on the theme of death and lamentation.

He further goes on to explain that the District Officer should not be viewed as the victim of a dilemma, that the Colonialism in the play is merely a "catalytic incident". The confrontation of the play is one of human nature, and the Yoruba mind.

Scene 1

It is the end of the day. The market is being closed, and stalls are being emptied. Through the marketplace emerges Elesin Oba, his drummers, and his praise-singers. Elesin is a happy, kind, and outgoing man. He is off to see his wives before he dies, for he wants to die in their company. He is ready to meet his ancestors, but he is enjoying his last day on Earth. His praise-singers caution him against the ways of women, and the praise-singers comment on how, despite the influence of foreigners, their ways remain unchanged. Elesin says that the gods have said no.

Elesin speaks of the Not-I Bird, and then chants the story of the bird. The trickster god Esu takes on the form of Death and comes calling, causing all of the people and the animals to say, "Not I". It becomes the call of a restless bird, who abandons his nest – the Not-I Bird, and in so doing, fails to do what is expected of him – his duty to die. Women in the market, including their leader, Iyaloja, gather round to listen, but they do not quite understand. Elesin becomes unhappy, and they ask his forgiveness if they have offended him, and seek a clear explanation. Elesin forgives them, and tells them to clothe him in rich garments. The women cheer and clothe him in wonderful clothes. The women tell Elesin they will all meet again in Heaven.

As Elesin, the Praise-Singers, and the women talk, he sees a beautiful girl come through. All of his life, he has had his pick of women and enjoyment as the King's Horseman. But now he sees the most beautiful girl he has ever seen in his life. He wonders if he has already died. Elesin asks Iyaloja about the girl. Iyaloja explains the



girl is engaged to be married. Elesin is annoyed by this. He doesn't want to die without any regrets, and he will regret not sleeping with this girl.

The girl is engaged to Iyaloja's own son, but she cannot deny Elesin, fearing he may end up cursing them from the afterlife. However, the union of a man going to death and a young girl beginning life bears a rare fruit, says Iyaloja. So Elesin cannot be refused for this reason, either. Iyaloja knows Elesin has a wandering eye, and reminds him not to be distracted from his duty, and not to leave unhappiness and misfortune for others. She then leaves to make arrangements for Elesin and the young girl.

Analysis

Wole Soyinka's play "Death and the King's Horseman" begins with a note from the writer himself. The note is about how readers and directors should approach the work. Soyinka is unhappy that so many reduce the depth and complexity of the play to the simple, worn-out theme of "clash of cultures." The note states that there is much more at work in the play than merely two cultures clashing with one another. Instead, he says that colonialism is merely a catalyst for the events. While there is certainly a clash between the imperial British culture and the native Yoruba culture, it is not that clash which constitutes the body of the work, nor does that clash comprise the source of the friction. Instead, Soyinka notes that the play deals with individual human action –the human mind –as the source of friction. As can be seen at the end, Elesin's actions and thoughts would have occurred with or without the presence of the British. The presence of the British provides the reader with a Western lens through which to view customs and traditions outside those of the West and for the Yoruba to see how their own culture differ from that of the British.

When the novel begins, there is no trace of the British. The marketplace through which Elesin, his drummers, and his praise-singers march is a typical Yoruba marketplace that is dominated by women. It closes up at the end of the day. Elesin is much loved and respected by his fellows, and he intends to die according to custom and tradition. Nothing can seemingly stop him, until he sees a beautiful, young girl whom he desires. He arranges to marry her through Iyaloja. After all, who can refuse to grant the last wishes of one to die? Elesin will ensure the honor of the tribe through his death, so his wish is granted. But Iyaloja sternly warns Elesin not to stray from his duty, not to lose his focus. Elesin, however, is full of talk about obeying custom and performing his duty.

Discussion Question 1

What is Elesin's duty? When the play begins, what are his thoughts and his attitude about this duty?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Iyaloja warn Elesin about remaining faithful to his duty? Why is she concerned? Should she have reason to be so concerned? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Sole Woyinka resist the reductionist tendency to draw upon the theme of "clash of cultures" in the play? Do you agree or disagree with his resistance? Explain.

Vocabulary

Reductionist, prejudicial, threnodic, evocation, vitality, dexterously, raconteur, retinue, succulent, resplendent, veneration, sacrilege.



Scene 2

Summary

Scene 2

Preparing for a ball, Colonial District Officer Simon Pilkings is dancing in costume with his wife Jane at his bungalow, when a Native Administration Policeman named Amusa interrupts them. Amusa is startled by the costumes and knocks over a flowerpot. Pilkings and his wife unmask themselves and ask when is going on. Amusa will not speak to them while they are clothed in the costumes of dead cult members.

Pilkings instructs Amusa to write down his report on a pad rather than speak it out loud, and he and Jane then leave to finish getting ready for the ball. Pilkings then reads the note. Amusa describes the pending ritual suicide of a chief, Elesin Oba, due to local customs, even though it is a criminal offense to the British. Amusa awaits further instructions. Pilkings decides to call for Joseph, a local Christian servant in the household, to inquire about all the drumming that can be heard in town, and about Elesin. Joseph affirms that Elesin will commit suicide as part of Yaruba custom. The Yaruba King, dead for one month, is to be buried –but his Horseman must die and be buried first, to lead the King to the afterlife.

Pilkings is annoyed because the party involved –Elesin –protested Pilkings's helping Elesin's son, Olunde, get into medical school in England. Pilkings believes the boy will make a wonderful doctor, and as long as the boy wants his help, he will have it. But Olunde, the eldest son, is not meant to travel away from the homeland, and so Elesin has cursed Pilkings –but Joseph says this curse has no affect because Pilkings is a Christian. Joseph explains that if Elesin had died before the King did, then Olunde was to take Elesin's place. Jane understands that this is why Olunde was so desperate to get away. Jane and Pilkings wonder if the drumming is connected to the ritual, and they ask Joseph, who says he does not know. He explains that at first, the drumming sounds like the death of a great chief, and then the drumming sounds like the wedding of a great chief. Pilkings is annoyed and sarcastic with Joseph for not knowing, and Jane scolds Pilkings for this. He is not concerned about anything other than the European Club ball, but Jane reminds Pilkings of his duty: whatever is going on has to be stopped, and he is the only person who can do it.

Pilkings apologizes to Joseph, and then sends Joseph off with a note for Amusa. Pilkings has sent word to Amusa to arrest Elesin, to bring Elesin to Pilkings's study, so no one will try to free him from such a place. Then things can be got to the bottom of. Pilkings then convinces Jane to go to the ball, revealing the Prince will be there, and will be giving out prizes. That is why Pilkings is so determined to get to the ball. Yet, he wants no trouble at all while the Prince is visiting, which is why he is determined to have Elesin arrested –just in case.



Analysis

In the second scene of Wole Soyinka's play, "Death and the King's Horseman," the reader is at least given a view of British colonialism as District Officer Pilkings and his wife Jane prepare for the coming masquerade ball being held that same evening. The reader sees that there is a stark contrast between the British and the Yoruba. The costumes Pilkings and his wife wear are merely costumes to them, but evil garbs to men like Amusa, who is a Muslim. Yet at the same time, the costumes do not scare the African, Joseph, a Christian, who puts trust in Christ above local pagan beliefs. Pilkings is very official, very duty-driven, but also conscious of his social reputation as a good man, so he apologizes to Joseph when he offends Joseph's devotion to Christianity, especially because Pilkings himself is a Christian.

Pilkings is set as a contrast and comparison point to Elesin. Like Elesin, Pilkings is driven by duty and seems to have no other primary focus, but to do his job well – masquerades aside. Pilkings wants to uphold the law and preserve the peace; Elesin wants to uphold custom and preserve the peace. Yet, where the two differ happens to be the very subject of Elesin's demise. Pilkings and his wife view pagan-motivated suicide as barbaric, while Elesin views it as natural. Here, there is indeed a clash of cultures, but as Woyinka has reminded readers, this is not the real friction in the play.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the characters of Elesin and Simon Pilkings. How are they similar? How are they different? How does duty figure between the two of them?

Discussion Question 2

Why do Pilkings and his wife view Elesin's intended suicide as barbaric? Why does Elesin not see it the same way?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Amusa fear the costumes that Pilkings and his wife wear? Why does Joseph not fear them? Why do Pilkings and his wife not fear them?

Vocabulary

Bewilderment, laboriously, uncorroborated, anthropologist, incite, exaggerating, provincials.



Scene 3

Summary

Scene 3

Sergeant Amusa and two constables arrive to arrest Elesin, but the women of the market block his path to a converted cloth stall. Amusa tells them to give way, for he is on official business. However, the women will not let him pass. The women taunt him and mock him for his service to white men. Amusa does his best to keep calm. He tells them that if they do not clear the way, he and his men will be forced to return with more men and weapons. The women use this as a way to mock his manhood, saying that the white man has taken away Amusa's weapon already. Amusa patiently says that the rituals now being committed must stop. The women tell Amusa that their chief will overcome earthly law that night.

Iyaloja appears on the scene and asks what is going on. Amusa explains that he has his duty to follow. Iyaloja says Amusa is interrupting a wedding night, not a suicide. Amusa still intends to take Elesin into custody. He asks her to tell the women to stop harassing himself and his men. The women close in around Amusa, berating him and harassing him and his men, even though Iyaloja tries to keep the peace. At last, Amusa and his men leave. After they go, the women mock Amusa for behaving like a white man.

Elesin emerges from his bridal chamber a few moments later, consummation complete. In the distance, drums herald the death of the King's Horse and Dog. The King's grooms will then bring the Horse and Dog to the market, where Elesin awaits. He knows Death is coming for him, and it is only a matter of time before it happens. Elesin slips into something of a hypnotic dance as he feels Death coming for him. The others wonder why he is so impatient for Death. They will all miss Elesin, and they are sorry to know that he must die.

Analysis

Though Soyinka cautions readers and players that "Death and the King's Horseman" is not dedicated to the theme of clash of cultures, there is a clash of cultures in the third scene which ties together and divides the British and Yoruba worlds. This occurs in the guise of a character, the character being Sergeant Amusa. Amusa, a Yoruban, is called upon as a member of the British colonial police to arrest Elesin. Yet, Amusa's efforts are thwarted by locals who say he has traded in his manhood to the British for agreeing to serve them. He is mercilessly and relentlessly mocked and harassed for his choices. He remains patient and holds his cool, understanding that he has a job to do—a duty to carry out. It is the women protecting Elesin who should understand the importance of duty, as they consider it their job to make sure Elesin commits suicide, pursuant to his own duty.



Elesin, meanwhile, enjoys the sexual consummation of his last-minute marriage with his young bride, and he appears, announcing the consummation is complete. Yet, there are hints of regret that he must die, but he seemingly gives into his duty. He falls into a hypnotism, a trance of sorts, as he awaits the coming of death. Iyaloja is still concerned about Elesin's decision to carry out his duty. She secretly knows that Elesin has very much enjoyed life, from wine and food and pleasure, to choosing whatever girls he wanted. It appears to the reader as if her fears are not founded. Strangely enough, Elesin, who has been all talk about his duty, is in a trance. Perhaps, he is not actually in a trance. It could be argued that he is contemplating his situation, rather than actually preparing for death.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the clash of culture between Amusa and the marketplace women. What is it like? Why do the women react the way they do? How does Amusa handle the situation? Why?

Discussion Question 2

What is the difficulty of Amusa's situation as a black man serving the British Empire? Why do you believe he serves them in the first place?

Discussion Question 3

Do you believe Elesin's hypnosis is preparation for death, or contemplation of his current situation? Why? What evidence in the play supports your position?

Vocabulary

Criminal, obstructing, illiterate, precipitately, mimic, euphoria, consummation, valiant



Scene 4

Summary

Scene 4

A masquerade ball is underway at the Residency, hosted by the European Club. It is a glamorous and exciting affair. All the vestiges of imperialism and colonialism can be seen. The Prince welcomes people to the ball. The Prince is especially taken with the costumes of the Pilkings. A note arrives, and the Resident and Pilkings step aside to discuss it. It has to do with the riotous market women relating to Elesin's pending suicide. Pilkings thinks the word "riot" is an exaggeration of Amusa's. Jane goes to find Amusa. The Resident reminds Pilkings that nothing can go wrong while the Prince is visiting. The Resident lectures Pilkings not to let things get out of hand. Amusa arrives, and he and Pilkings then take off.

Olunde appears and speaks to Jane. She has not seen him for a long time. While Olunde is not happy with the Pilkingses having worn cult costumes, he does say that he is very impressed with England. But he explains that he has also discovered that the English do not respect what they do not understand, though he finds them admirable and honorable in many other ways as well. They speak of the war and death, and Jane says that life should never be thrown away deliberately. Olunde finds self-sacrifice noble if in the right cause. Olunde, having learned the King is dead weeks before, has returned to bury his father. Olunde explains he doesn't want Mr. Pilkings to top the suicide, because he doesn't want Mr. Pilkings to be hated by the people, especially after all of the help the Pilkingses have been.

Jane contends that the ritual suicide following the death of the King is barbaric. Olunde explains that the white race has a talent for survival, even in the grimmest of circumstances. Olunde says whites should allow others to survive in their own ways, even through suicide. Olunde goes on to say that people view things differently. What is sold to the public as victories in the war in newsreels, Olunde has seen firsthand as bloodbaths, treating the wounded and dying. Nevertheless, he is grateful for what he has learned from the white races. But he says nothing gives them the right to pass judgment on other races. He says he will not throw away his training, and will complete medical school, as soon as he buries his father.

Outside, the drums reach a crescendo and stop, and Olunde knows his father is dead. His simplicity in the announcement shocks Jane, who rushes away. Olunde is interrogated by an aide-de-camp, who wants to know what Olunde has done to Jane. But Jane returns, telling the aide-de-camp that no harm has been done. Jane apologizes. Olunde says it is nothing. She asks why Olunde seems so unfeeling toward his father's death. Olunde explains that it is perhaps his medical training, that he has seen so much of death. Jane believes it has to do with the things they don't understand about the Yoruba. He explains he has thought of his father as being dead for a month



already, since the death of the King. Even though he and his father did not get along, he has a duty to his father's body, and his people, which is why he has returned. As Olunde leaves, Simon returns.

Jane asks her husband what has happened. Olunde is happy to see Pilkings. Olunde thanks Pilkings for trying to stop the suicide, but says it would be a calamity if Pilkings had succeeded. Pilkings calls for the aide-de-camp, Bob, and asks if the cells in the Residency's disused annex cellar still has bars in it, where slaves were once kept. Bob says they do. Bob is ordered to get the keys, and to assemble a large number of guards for the night. They are to be deployed at the bottom of the hill, far away from the house and the gates.

Pilkings wants his prisoner locked up in the cellar, and says that he had let it be known the prisoner was being taken to his own house, which is not probably being attacked. Pilkings will bring the prisoner down himself, and two guards will be kept with him all night. Olunde is horrified that something may have happened because Pilkings has failed to stop his father's suicide. But Elesin's voice can be heard, and Olunde realizes his father is still alive. Elesin breaks free of his captors and runs to his son and Jane, where Pilkings and constables surround him. Olunde announces he has no father, and walks away.

Analysis

As Soyinka has stated, the reader should not look upon Pilkings as someone who faces a dilemma. Soyinka says he has inserted no scenes or dialogue or inferences that this is the case. As can be gleaned from the play itself, this is true. Pilkings is not operating under a dilemma, but under duty. He is duty-bound to his office, and the stakes are raised with the arrival of the Prince, and the need not to let anything get out of hand. While Pilkings states he does not care about what happens to Elesin one way or another, he does care about maintaining order and duty. As is borne out in the final chapter, however, Pilkings does care, and not merely from the vantage point of duty. There is something greater, something moral, that compels Pilkings to try to save Elesin's life in the final scene.

Meanwhile, the reader is introduced to Olunde, the son of Elesin, who looks with objectivity upon the English the way the English look upon the Yoruba with objectivity. Olunde contends that the English are good people with good points, as well as bad points. The same is true from Jane's perspective regarding the Yoruba, though she finds the entire business of the King's Horseman's suicide to be barbaric without exception. Olunde references the English war effort as a counterclaim, but also says there is a sense of honor in what is occurring –both for the English, and for the Yoruba through Pilkings. Though disowned by his father, Olunde is also honored by his father –and dishonored when he discovers his father is still alive.



Discussion Question 1

Does Officer Pilkings face a dilemma regarding Elesin? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What sort of perspective does Olunde offer the situation? What do he and Jane talk about? Is Jane, or is Olunde right regarding the taking of one's own life? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Olunde disown his father? Is Olunde justified in this action? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

Redolent, imperial, tawdry, quaint, abrupt, desecrate, edifying, morbid, enmity, decadence, primitivism, bereaved, blasphemy, impudent.



Scene 5

Summary

Scene 5

Elesin is locked up in the cell with his bride. Two guards stand nearby as Pilkings, now in an officer's uniform, enters the room. Elesin refers to Pilkings as "ghostly one". Elesin tells Pilkings he has shattered the peace of the world forever. He goes on to tell Pilkings that he did not save his life, but has destroyed it. Pilkings announces he has done his duty, and has no regrets. Elesin says regrets will come later. He says he was prepared to die, that his whole life was meant for that one moment of death, but Pilkings has stopped it. He does not blame Pilkings anymore, though. It is the white race at large which has stopped the destinies of the Yoruba. Pilkings carries word of Olunde's apologies for what he said. However, Elesin reveals that Olunde's contempt has rescued some of his shame. Olunde will soon be visiting Elesin before returning to England.

Pilkings asks Elesin if he does not contradict his own race. Elesin asks for clarification. Pilkings explains that he has lived with the Yoruba long enough to understand much of their ways. He wonders why so many would egg on Elesin's death, when at the same time, they say that no one dies willingly, that death is approached grimly. Elesin does not reply, but sighs. Jane calls Pilkings, and Pilkings leaves to speak to her.

Elesin turns to speak to his young bride. He confesses his loss of will to commit suicide has wracked his mind. He says he blamed the white man and the gods for his lack of willingness to die, and then he blames the girl for giving him a taste of the beauty of this world. His weakness is not just from Pilkings, but from the girl as well. He says he had begun to regain his willingness to die, until Pilkings entered the scene. Jane gives Pilkings a note from Iyaloja, who wants to see Elesin, so that a riot can be prevented. Pilkings asks if Elesin would like to see Iyaloja; Elesin consents. Iyaloja is brought in.

She is incensed and ashamed at Elesin. His failure to commit suicide was not the fault of the white man, but the fault of Elesin, for being distracted by a beautiful young girl. Iyaloja tells Elesin he has betrayed them. She mocks and berates him. Elesin says he needs her to understand, and he needs to understand himself, that Iyaloja brought about the renewal of his tie to Earth. No matter the cause, Elesin lost his will to die, and explain it though he might, Iyaloja is unforgiving. She looks upon Elesin as cowardly scum, now. She says a burden has been brought that Elesin must see. Iyaloja questions Pilkings, and whether or not the English have death customs for their leaders of their own. Pilkings confirms that they do, but they don't force others to commit suicide to keep the dead company. Iyaloja explains that without Elesin, the King will be lost and confused, and will curse the living. The King will be forced to wander in a void of evil beings. Some women and the Praise-Singer bring in the burden: the body of Olunde. He has killed himself to preserve the honor of the family and the race. The son has



given his life for the father. Elesin is horrified. He strangles himself with a chain as Pilkings rushes to unlock the cell door, but it is too late. Pilkings tries to resuscitate Elesin, but to no avail. He turns on Iyaloja, asking her if she has what she wanted. She explains that it is the whites who brought the current situation to be. She screams at him, telling him not to close Elesin's eyes; it is the young bride who does it, and covers them with dirt. Iyaloja tells everyone to cast their minds from the dead to the unborn.

Analysis

The final scene of Wole Soyinka's play is the most emotionally complex and philosophically deep part of the novel. Elesin, in jail, makes the startling confession that he was wrong to place blame for his failure to fulfill his duty on Pilkings, or even to some large extent, his new wife. His failure to fulfill his duty is his own doing. He is the culprit, he is responsible. The character of the duty-driven Elesin thus morphs, and expands into something very complex, and very human. Despite his desire to want to fulfill his duty, he is afraid. He does not want to die. This is a very tender and human revelation. But through failing to do his duty, he has dishonored himself, his family, and his tribe – and it is his son who seeks to fill the void of honor.

With Elesin's suicide, the character of Pilkings morphs into something very much human as well. Pilkings, in perhaps his only philosophical moment, questions Elesin about the hypocrisy of the people wishing for his suicide. Elesin, when he kills himself, is attempted to be resuscitated by Pilkings. This is startling for Pilkings's character, which has up to now been one of formality and official duty. Pilkings himself attempts to save Elesin, which is not his job to do on a personal level. Yet his rank and position are gone as he attempts to revive the chief. Despite being a man of duty, Pilkings is a thoughtful man with morals, and he is very much human. Just as Elesin and the others have said, the Yoruba will continue on and do what they must, with or without the British –and this proves Soyinka's statement that the clash of cultures is not the main source of friction for the plot.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Olunde kill himself? Is this justifiable? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Pilkings personally attempt to save Elesin when Elesin strangles himself?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Elesin take his own life in the end? What purpose is served by this?

Vocabulary

Contempt, shame, emissary, treachery, agitation, dubiously, dirge, vestments.



Characters

Elesin

Elesin is one of the two main characters and principal protagonists of the play. Middle-aged and well-loved and well-respected, Elesin is the King's Horseman. The death of the King means that Elesin must commit suicide to guide the King through the afterlife. During the present life, Elesin has enjoyed all of the possible rewards of his position. The night he is to die, he spies a beautiful young girl, and marries her so that he may have sex with her. He loses his nerve to die, and does not fulfill his duty of suicide. He blames the British for stopping him, and then later his new wife, before realizing the fault lies with him. When Elesin's son Olunde dies to save the family's honor and the honor of the tribe, Elesin kills himself.

Simon Pilkings

Simon Pilkings is one of the two main characters and principal protagonists of the play. Though his age is not known, nor much about his appearance, his character is very duty-oriented, formal, and official. He has a wife, Jane, whom he clearly loves and respects, for he relies on her for her opinions on state affairs. Pilkings, under law, is bound to stop Elesin from killing himself. With the Prince in town, Pilkings is under even more pressure to keep the peace and obey the law. Pilkings ultimately upholds the law, though he personally tries to stop Elesin from killing himself.

Iyaloja

Iyaloja is the "mother" of the market, the woman in charge of the marketplace. All of the other women and girls look to her as something of a tribal elder. She is very duty oriented, consistently reminding Elesin of his duty. She also tries, with little success, to keep the peace between the local women and the British authorities. When Elesin shirks his duties, Iyaloja condemns him roundly and castigates him for his cowardice and failure. When Elesin dies, Iyaloja advises everyone to look to the future of the unborn.

Olunde

Olunde, the eldest son of Elesin, is strong, capable, and intelligent. Through help from the Pilkings, he is attending medical school in England. He has returned to Nigeria to bury his father. Upon learning of his father's failure to fulfill his duty, Olunde kills himself to save the family's honor, and the tribe's honor.



Jane Pilkings

Morally just and kind, Jane is the loving and intelligent wife of Simon Pilkings. Jane and her husband help Olunde go to England for medical school, and Jane continually offers her husband advice on affairs of the state. Deeply Christian, she views the suicide practices of the Yoruba as barbaric.

Young Bride

The most beautiful girl that Elesin has ever laid eyes on, the young bride is engaged to Iyalaja's son, but she arranges for the girl and Elesin to marry instead, given Elesin's duty. The young bride is blamed by Elesin for taking away his will to die, but in the end, he confesses this is not the case; she dutifully tends to his body when he kills himself.

Amusa

A sergeant in the colonial police force, Amusa is a Muslim. He is very patient, and very dutiful. He honors some Yoruba traditions –such as fearing certain costumes –but shuns other traditions, such as ritual suicide. When he arrives to arrest Elesin, he is mocked for his service to the British.

Praise Singer

A constant companion of Elesin's, the praise singer sings praise about Elesin and tends to him. The praise singer respects and admires Elesin, but when Elesin does not fulfill his duty, the singer turns against him.

The Resident

As the occupant of the Residency, the Resident appears to be a governing official in the region around Oyo. He is powerful enough to entertain the Prince and powerful enough to command Pilkings to do his duty. The Resident applies pressure to Pilkings to keep the peace and uphold the law.

Joseph

Joseph is a young, bright house servant for the Pilkings. He puts no stock in the old ways of the Yoruba. As a committed Christian, he does not fear evil spirits or Yoruba folklore. He acts as a source of information about the drums and the culture for the Pilkings.



Symbols and Symbolism

Rich Garments

Rich garments are created and sold by the women in the marketplace. On the night of his suicide, Elesin's wish to be garbed in such garments is granted. These rich garments speak to Elesin's magnificent power and strong influence. The garments show how much the others respect and admire him.

Costumes

Costumes of dead cult members are worn by the Pilkings for their masquerade ball. Amusa fears the evil they represent, but Joseph and the Pilkings do not. Their lack of fear is based on their dismissal of paganism and their embracing of Christianity.

Chains

Chains are used to tie up Elesin when he is arrested and put in the Residency's annex cellar. The chains are also metaphorical. They represent the chains that hold Elesin back from his duty and his true nature. He cannot escape or deny the chains. So, he uses the chains to kill himself in the end.

Batons

Batons are wielded by Amusa and the constabulary of Oyo. They are tugged on by the women in the marketplace. The batons become a symbol of the loss of manhood to the British. The local police have, in the minds of the locals, traded in their manhood to be servants to the whites.

Bloodied Sheet

Borne by Elesin from the bridal chamber constructed for him in a stall by the women of the marketplace, the bloodied sheet is proof that the young bride was not only a virgin, but consummated the marriage with Elesin.

Settings

Nigeria

Located in West Africa, Nigeria is a country occupied by the British during the time of the play. It is overseen by the British Colonial Administration, governed by the Resident in some respect, and visited by the British Prince.

Oyo

Oyo is an ancient city in Nigeria. It is occupied by the British. It is where the Residency is located, as well as the Resident and his wife. The town is also home to a bungalow where British District Officer Pilkings and his wife Jane live. Oyo is also the home to the Yoruba tribe. It is where they live, work, and carry on their customs.

The Bungalow

The bungalow is a beautiful home located in Oyo, Nigeria. It is where Officer Simon Pilkings and his wife Jane live. The bungalow's caretaker is Joseph, a local boy who has converted to Christianity. The Bungalow is where Pilkings originally intends to take Elesin.

The Residency

Surrounded by a fence and gates, the Residency is located at the top of a mighty hill. The Residency is where the Resident and his wife live. In the play, it is visited by the Prince. It is the location of a massive masquerade ball, thrown by the European Club. The Residency has an old annex and a cellar in which Elesin is placed for guarding.

The Cellar

The cellar, located in the annex of the residency, was once used to hold slaves before they were sent to the coast. It currently houses broken furniture. After being captured, Elesin was taken to the cellar. He later commits suicide in the cellar.



Themes and Motifs

Honor

Honor is a major, dominant, and overarching theme in Wole Soyinka's play, "Death and the King's Horseman". Honor includes respect, integrity, moral worth, upright behavior, and merit, owing to one's position, actions, deeds, or words. In the novel, honor is a word that surrounds the actions of the tribal members of the Yoruba, especially when it comes to customs, traditions, and rituals. Honor in the play chiefly attaches itself to the ritual suicide of Elesin, the King's Horseman.

Elesin is revered and respected as an honorable man, because he is the King's Horseman. Nothing is denied to him, or withheld from him, from young girls to clothes to food and wine. He lives a very easy and pleasurable existence, and that he is a good man also owes to the honor that he carries for himself, his family, and the tribe as a whole. But when the King dies, the honorable thing to do for Elesin is for him to commit suicide, so that he will be in the afterlife to guide the King. Elesin approaches this duty with a sense of honor and optimism, for the respect and rewards lavished upon him increase. Yet, at the last minute, Elesin gets cold feet, and uses the British as an excuse for why he could not commit suicide.

Because of this refusal to commit suicide, Elesin's honor is irreparably damaged. His closest supporters and friends turn on him, looking upon him as if he were cowardly scum. Indeed, the honor lost in the process is of such a cost that Elesin is disowned and renounced by his own son, Olunde. Olunde is so traumatized by his father's cowardice in the face of tradition that he takes his own life, to save the honor of the family, and the honor of the tribe. Upon seeing his dead son, Elesin commits suicide.

Death

Death is a major theme in the play "Death and the King's Horseman" by Wole Soyinka. Death, simply put, is the end of life. In Soyinka's play, death takes on two forms: that of literal death, and that of figurative death. Both greatly impact the course of events within the play.

Though death is not something willingly wished for by the people of the Yoruba tribe, they have no problem cheering for the impending death of Elesin. Their lamentations, that they will miss him, coupled with the realization that he will die, causes Elesin to rethink his decision. He will miss the honored and exalted place he has occupied in life, and is not ready to give all of that up. In so doing, he refuses to commit ritualistic suicide, only to kill himself following his son's suicide late in the play. This is literal death.

Figurative death also occurs in the novel. Figurative death, in this case, means the end of something relating to life, but not necessarily life itself as a matter of literal existence.



As Elesin himself puts it, “Life is honor. It ends when honor ends.” Here, Elesin claims not to see death as the literal ending of life, but the figurative ending of life, which ends when honor ends. Without honor, there can be no life. But, Elesin loves life. To save his life, he sacrifices his honor, and in so doing, figuratively commits suicide. Now he has life without honor. According to himself, he is already dead.

Duty

Duty is a dominant theme in Wole Soyinka’s play “Death and the King’s Horseman.” Duty involves the moral, legal, and spiritual obligations of an individual owing to beliefs, customs, traditions, occupation, position, or role employed. Duty cuts across every conceivable boundary in the novel, from race to culture. Each character associated with duty views their duties in different ways. Sometimes, the duties themselves differ.

The most obvious forms of duty are those which are upheld by the characters of Elesin and Pilkings. Elesin’s duty is to commit ritual suicide, owing to custom of the Yoruba. This will allow him, as the King’s Horseman, to guide the King in the afterlife. Indeed, the Yoruba cheer on Elesin to kill himself in pursuit of that duty. Pilkings’ duty, however, is to maintain peace and uphold the law. There is law against suicide. Pilkings knows that he cannot let Elesin commit suicide, no matter what the cause may be. Pilkings, as a member of the British Empire, has that obligation. On the one hand, duty compels Elesin to death. Yet, on the other hand, duty compels Pilkings to preserve Elesin’s life.

Duty appears elsewhere as well. The Yoruba, owing to Elesin’s position, give Elesin whatever he wants from food to young girls. Iyaloja even gives up her son’s betrothed to Elesin out of duty. Amusa, as a member of the colonial police, has the duty to arrest Elesin and uphold the law. Initially, the women of the Yoruba protect Elesin from arrest. Amusa is mocked for his duty; and, the women are mocked for their clinging to old ways. Olunde realizes his own duty is to preserve the honor of his family and his tribe, and so kills himself because his father has not killed himself. The Resident, owing his duty to his position in service to the Prince and the Empire, reinforces the point to Pilkings that there can be no incidents while the Prince is present. Finally, Pilkings senses a moral duty within himself to try to save Elesin when Elesin finally engages in killing himself.



Styles

Point of View

Wole Soyinka has written "Death and the King's Horseman" in the third-person omniscient perspective when it comes to setting scenes or events. However, Soyinka chooses first-person limited-omniscient perspective when it comes to the characters in the play actually speaking. This is done for a few different reasons. The first is that the third-person omniscient perspective in terms of narration allows the reader context within the greater historical situation of the play. Because it is a play, no one else can speak for the characters but themselves, hence the first-person perspective from each of the characters as they speak. The limited omniscient factor of this perspective allows the reader the understanding that events are unfolding as they are being read, and the readers know only as much as the characters.

Language and Meaning

Wole Soyinka tells his play "Death and the King's Horseman" in language that is simple, but deeply poetic. This is done for a few different reasons. The first is that many of the characters in the play are uneducated, and so simple language speaks to a factor of believability. The second is that it allows the reader to follow the plot, and to understand Yoruba customs and ideas without much difficulty. Furthermore, the simple language also allows Soyinka to ram home points and ideas, without obfuscating them in dense prose. Yet, because of this, the language takes on a poetic quality as well. It is poetic because of the simplicity and the force of the points conveyed. (Consider the statement by Elesin that "Life is honor. It ends when honor ends.")

Structure

Wole Soyinka divides his play "Death and the King's Horseman" into five chronological scenes. Each scene focuses chiefly around a specific event or incident. Scene 1, for example, focuses on Elesin's preparations for death, whereas Scene 2 focuses on the British reaction to the impending suicide. This straightforward structure is necessary for Soyinka, who contends the play should be acted out in one long continuous movement, without any breaks at all between scenes.



Quotes

Our world was never wrenched from its true course.
-- Praise-Singer (Chapter 1 paragraph 6)

Importance: In the beginning of the play, the Praise-Singer talks to Elesin about duty, and how no matter what happens, duty must be done. The British can appear or disappear, but duty must always be executed. No matter what external things change, the world of the Yoruba continues on. This foreshadows Elesin's later desperation to place blame externally for his failure to fulfill his own duty.

Life is honor. It ends when honor ends.
-- Elesin (Chapter 1 paragraph 11)

Importance: Here, Elesin speaks of figurative death (see themes section, "Death"). He says that life is composed only of honor, and that without honor, life does not exist. It cannot exist. Here, he foreshadows his own coming fate.

Only the curses of the departed are to be feared.
-- Iyaloja (Chapter 1 paragraph 16)

Importance: Owing to her duty of carrying on with Yoruba customs, Iyajola tells the others that they should only fear dishonor done to the dead. When dishonor is done to the dead, curses are put on the living. And those are to be feared much more than anything else done in life.

Don't you remember? He's that chief with whom I had a scrap some three or four years ago. I helped his son get to a medical school in England, remember? He fought tooth and nail to prevent it.
-- Simon Pilkings (Chapter 2 paragraph 22)

Importance: Here, Pilkings recounts to his wife, Jane, his past run-in with Elesin. He knows Elesin to be a tough individual, to be stubborn, and to be of determined convictions. This makes Pilkings realize he is in for a journey with Elesin once more and that Elesin cannot be taken lightly. It also establishes a dynamic between the two.

You know me, I no like trouble but duty is duty. I here to arrest Elesin for criminal intent.
-- Amusa (Chapter 3 paragraph 28-29)

Importance: Amusa, speaking to the women of the tribe, and to Iyaloja, speaks about the duty he must perform as a colonial police officer. He is not there to cause trouble or create a stir, but only to uphold the law and arrest Elesin. It is more evidence of the import of duty in the novel.

I have freed myself of earth and now it's getting dark. Strange voices guide my feet.
-- Elesin (Chapter 3 paragraph 35)



Importance: Elesin, following the sexual consummation of his marriage to his young bride, prepares for death. He believes he is free to die now, though this later proves not to be the case. He is drawn by something beyond his supposed desire to die. A strange voice guides him toward life, not death.

You realize how disastrous it would have become if things had erupted while His Highness was here.

-- Resident (Chapter 4 paragraph 38)

Importance: Speaking to Pilkings, the Resident reinforces just how important it is to keep peace and order while the Prince is present. Such an uproar would lead to the erosion of British authority, power, and respect for the Empire. As such, the Resident stresses Pilking's duty to do his job.

Yes, Mrs. Pilkings, my father is dead. His will-power has always been enormous; I know he is dead.

-- Olunde (Chapter 4 paragraph 45)

Importance: Elesin is held in such high regards by all, including his disowned son, that no one doubts he will follow through with the ritual suicide. Olunde knows his father well and believes his father is already dead, owing to his father's determination to carry out his duty.

You did not save my life, District Officer. You destroyed it.

-- Elesin (Chapter 5 paragraph 50)

Importance: Faced with shame for not wanting to commit suicide, Elesin lashes out at everyone. He is seeking to externally place blame. This includes blaming Pilking, who believes that he has saved Elesin's life. Elesin says his life has been destroyed instead. Elesin has no idea of how correct he really is, especially when it comes to figurative death.

There lies the honor of your household and of our race.

-- Iyaloja (Chapter 5 paragraph 61)

Importance: Iyaloja, having castigated Elesin for his failure to commit suicide, shows Elesin his son's body, who has died in his stead. The only honor that is left for Elesin is that his son is honorable, and has sacrificed himself to save the honor of the family, and of the tribe. This causes Elesin to commit suicide in the end.