Prayer to the Masks Study Guide

Prayer to the Masks by Léopold Sédar Senghor

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Over the course of his long career as a writer, philosopher, and statesman, the Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor has inspired countless young writers throughout the French-speaking world. Along with Aimé Cesaire and Léon Damas, he founded the *négritude* movement, which argued that the black people of colonial Africa and the Caribbean should take pride in their African roots and find in their native traditions an inspiration for a new literature and a new way of life. Senghor went on to put these ideas into practice in his wide field of activity. He wrote voluminously as a poet and as a philosopher of the new culture and politics of African independence from colonial rule. In the political arena, he was one of the major architects of independence for his own country, Senegal, and for French West Africa more generally. He served as president of Senegal for two decades.

"Prayer to the Masks" is typical of Senghor's writing throughout his long career, although it comes from his first collection, *Songs of the Shadow*, published in 1945. It exhibits clearly the features that would characterize his poetic writing: the use of African themes and settings, the highly rhythmic long lines reminiscent of the Bible and Walt Whitman, the evocations of music and song, and the contrast of the vitality of a mythic (and future) Africa with the present of both Europe and Africa under colonialism. It is the poem of a young man seeking to connect with a past he senses will give him inspiration to struggle past the damaged life of the present to forge a better future for himself and his people.

Author Biography

Senghor was born in Joal, a village in Central Senegal, in 1906. His father was a successful merchant dealing with the French in goods for the export trade. After one year of elementary education in Joal, he was sent to a missionary school in Ngasobil and a Catholic high school in Dakar, where he was educated in the French language and French culture. Although he had originally wanted to enter the priesthood, Senghor was sent on scholarship to France in 1928, where he pursued the study of literature at the Lycée Louis le Grand and the Sorbonne. In the preparatory class at the lycée, Senghor befriended his classmate Georges Pompidou, who later became president of France. Senghor earned the License-ès-lettres (equivalent to a bachelor's degree), the Diplôme d'études supérieures (equivalent to the master's), and the agrégation (like a Ph.D.). He was the first African from the French colonies to earn the latter degree.

The 1920s and 1930s were decades of developing political and cultural consciousness on the part of American, Caribbean, and African-born blacks. Relatively large urban communities of blacks developed in such world cities as New York and Paris, and previously separate groups such as African- Americans, Caribbean-Creoles, and Africans from French colonies such as Senegal began to encounter one another, form friendships and organizations, and collaborate in cultural and literary publications. Their response was to found a literary and cultural movement, affirming the unique value of blackness and the black cultures of Africa and the Americas, under the banner of "negritude." The founding figures were Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Damas, all three students in the early 1930s in Paris and participants in a series of reviews and journals. The term "negritude" itself was coined by Aimé Césaire in his book-length poem *Notes on a Return to the Native Land*. Later, in 1947 and 1948, Damas and Senghor published anthologies that further gave shape to the literary movement.

Senghor served in the French army during World War II and was confined for several months in a German prisoner-of-war camp. After the war, he was actively involved in Senegalese and African politics. He served in the cabinet of the French prime minister Edgar Faure in 1955 as Secretary of State. In 1960, he was closely involved in attempts to form a multi-state federation of West African states, and in that same year, he was elected president of the newly independent Republic of Senegal. He served as president until 1980, when he stepped down from office. In 1984, he was appointed to the prestigious Académie Francaise for his literary and humanistic achievements.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-4

The poem begins with an "apostrophe," an address to an object or spirit. Here, as the title indicates, this address is a prayer to the masks, which appear in the poem both as works of African art and as more general spirits of African culture, society, and history. The poet lists the colors of the masks as black, red, black-and-white, thus also suggesting the reference of the masks as symbols of race and skin color. In the third line, Senghor suggests that these masks are also spirits of nature, linked to the winds that blow from the four directions of north, south, east, and west. As spirits that blow, they also imply that the masks are related to the poet's breath and poetic inspiration. As the fourth line indicates, he greets them with silence, as if listening to what the mask-spirits will whisper to him on the wind.

Lines 5-7

The poet introduces his family's guardian animal, the lion, symbol of aristocratic virtue and courage. Traditionally these animals were thought to be the first ancestor and the protector of the family line. In mentioning his lion-headed ancestor, Senghor refers to the name of his father, Diogoye, which in his native Serer language means lion. In ceremonies where masks would be used, the family might be represented by a lion mask. In lines 6 and 7, Senghor further reinforces the implications of long tradition and patriarchal power. The lion guards the ground that is forbidden to women and to passing things, in favor of values, memories, and customs that stretch back into mythic antiquity.

Lines 8-10

These lines develop a complex relation between the faces of the ancestors, the poet's face, and the masks. Line 8 speaks of the masks as idealized representations of previously living faces. The masks eliminate the mobile features and signs of age in the faces of the living ancestors, but in doing so outlive their death. In turn, they are able to give shape to the face of the poet bent over the page and writing his prayer to the masks. He appeals to them to listen to him, for he is the living image of those masks to whom he is writing a prayer.

Lines 11-12

These lines contrast the glorious past of Africa, when vast black-ruled empires spanned the continent, and the present, in which the peoples of Africa have been subjugated by the imperial conquests of European nations. The "pitiable princess" symbolizes the nobility of traditional Africa, and her death represents both the general suffering and decline of traditional African culture and the loss of political power of blacks to rule

themselves. Yet the relation to Europe is not presented solely in a negative way. The image of the umbilical cord suggests that the European conquest has nourished a new Africa soon to be born, but one that will eventually have to sever its ties with its European "mother" if it is to live and grow.

Lines 13-14

The masks are called to witness the sad history of modern Africa, and they look on, god-like with their changeless faces. Yet Senghor also suggests that the traditional customs and values have apparently not been able to respond to the great changes that history has brought about. The poem implicitly comes to a question and a turning point: do the masks represent a valuable longview from which the present can be seen in its proper perspective, or are they merely relics of a past that have nothing to say to those who are exploited and suffering in the present?

Lines 15-16

The poet prays to the magic spirits of the masks to help speed the rebirth suggested by the image of the umbilical cord connecting Africa to Europe in line 12. Implicitly, reviving the ancestral spirits of the masks will help sever the ties of dependence. In turn, a reborn African creativity can help Europe to a more life-affirming use of its material and scientific wealth, just as the brown yeast is necessary for making bread from white flour.

Lines 17-19

These lines further develop the idea that Africa will provide the life-impulse to a Europe that is oriented toward mechanical values, materialist gain, and war. It is the rhythm of African music and dance that can change the thud of machines into something better. A reborn Africa will lend its youthful energy to a senile Europe, bringing joy and hope where there has been isolation, exhaustion, despair, and death.

Lines 20-21

In the imagery of "men of cotton, of coffee, of oil," Senghor refers to the exploitation of Africa for its raw materials and to European conceptions of black Africans as merely a source of cheap labor and economic profit. Looking back to the figures of death and rebirth in the previous lines, he ironically notes how "they," the Europeans, view the black African as a fearful image of death, "the waking dead."

Line 22

But rather than allowing their humanity to be reduced to the economic value of the agricultural goods listed in line 20, the African of the future will have a different, creative

relation to the soil and the natural world. Like the participants in a traditional ceremony in which masks are used, these new Africans absorb the powers of the natural spirits through the rhythm of dance, music, and poetry.

Summary

At the prayer point, Senghor greets the spirits in silence. The altar is a place of solitude. It's a place where masks representing each of the mighty tribes of Africa are displayed and where worshippers congregate to pay their respects.

First Senghor pays homage to the spirits for their eternal greatness. He allows each one their due respect by acknowledging the color of their masks, including the colors of black, red and white The masks are prominently displayed at this place of worship.

Senghor believes "masks of the four cardinal points where the Spirit blows" have a forceful presence that protects all corners of the world. These spirits come together at this sacred place to be honored and praised in silent prayer.

"The ancestor with the lion head" is called upon to maintain an aura of peace at the altar while Senghor prays. This ancestor protects the holy place from intruders, boisterous laughter from flirtatious women, and loud talking.

Senghor's forefathers will be attentive to his pleas to help those in despair. Senghor acknowledges that he is a product of these forefathers, referred to as "masks with faces without masks." They created him in their images, and he pleads for their intervention.

In silent prayer, Senghor calls on these spirits that represent the problems of the African people. The country of Africa is dying, and its fragile fazade is crumbling needlessly. The cities are in "agony like a sorrowful princess", and their closest ally, Europe, is in a similar stage of decay. The traditions of the country are falling away and cannot survive without the help of the ancestors.

On his knees, Senghor implores the spirits to look with a steady eye at the oppression of the children of the land, some who have given their lives for their country. In spite of continued efforts to keep their people strong and proud, Africa has moved in a different direction, has moved away from longstanding traditions.

Senghor prays that, with the help of the spirits, the people of Africa will answer the call to rebuild their empires. This great task can only be achieved with the supernatural intervention of these forefathers.

Senghor cries to the spirits to help keep the African nations strong. If the nations continue to erode, there will be no tribesmen left alive who can carry on for the sake of the children and the generations to come, and there will be no one to bring back joy and hope to those who have lost all hope.

Senghor blames the condition of the African nations on modern machinery, even though the machinery is responsible for the growth of the country's agricultural industries such as cotton, coffee, and oil.The machinery is also responsible for the wars that have

plagued the country over the years. This rapid growth is also responsible for eroding the foundation of many African empires.

The African nations want more than to be known as warriors and "men of death;" they want to be known as people who brought back joy and dancing to their heritage and who built even stronger empires.

Analysis

The speaker of this poem addresses his ancestors and the sacred order of African tribal worship. Senghor, the speaker, desperately hopes the spirits of the ancestors will combine to create one powerful force, strong enough to return the African nations to the wondrous place it once was. Senghor acknowledges those spirits by calling on the color of their masks. Here, all pretenses are cast aside. Here, he opens up and lets his true feelings come forward. Senghor greets the spirits of his ancestors at this prayer place, a quiet place where peace and tranquility rein, and an ethereal spirit radiates a magnetic and powerful force of protection.

This place is filled with the presence of those who have died and were buried here and whose spirits still inhabit the earth, and Senghor feels the essence of his forefathers filling the air around him. With an undying love, he greets the invisible congregation with reverence and respect.

The "masks with faces without masks" are called upon at this time to maintain peace and tranquility while he prays. These spirits are believed to have the power to uplift the people of Africa, those troubled and dying, as they wait for help from strong powerful forces that rule over the earth.

Senghor's face is like that of his forefathers; and, as he kneels at the altar, he calls on his own ancestors to hear him. The masks are symbolic of the ancestors to whom Senghor now prays for help. He begs them to understand the condition of Africa and Europe, their closest ally. Not only is Africa falling apart, but so also are the nations that have colonized in the African nations. The cities are crumbling, and there is no one to help.

"Listen to me, " he pleads for their attention, imploring them to fix their steady eyes on the oppressed children and the besieged people who are their children. The children mentioned are symbolic of the future. If the children are dying and oppressed, then the future of the African nations are also dying and oppressed. Senghor prays for unity among the nations to withstand the eroding condition of their country, but without the intervention of the spirits, this might never be accomplished and many more lives may be lost for lack of unity between the tribes.

Senghor wants the spirits to help his people, to say "yes" to rebuilding African empires because the tribes cannot do it without their supernatural help. Turning to the ancestors is Senghor's way of symbolically pleading for a return to the past. There is no one better equipped to return the African nations to their pristine past than those who dwelt there.

The cities cannot rise again without hope and help from those who are stronger than those who remain. The ancestors' strength is needed to keep the rhythm, traditions, and pride alive and so that modern machines will not overcome the cities.

Unification and strength are necessary for the future of the nations; the empires are necessary for children to learn about their ancestors, their heritage, and their culture. Senghor asks who else will teach the rhythm to the world if not the mighty tribes of Africa. If not the ancestors, then no one else will "make a joyful noise at daybreak," keep the memories of their forefathers alive, and bring hope and life to those who no longer have hope.

Africa not only has men who are known for their crops of cotton, coffee and oil, and men who fight in wars, but also for men who bring happiness to their families, and laughter, joy, and dancing to the people of the African empires. The more they dance together, enjoy their heritage, and stand united, the stronger they can become. With their feet more firmly planted on the ground, their power will be more eminent as it gains strength and spreads abroad to neighboring allies.

Leopold Senghor illustrates the importance of prayer to rebuild the spirit, increase joy, bring balance to life, and feed the hungry soul. He uses masks as an illustration to the reader to signify that there are many spirits that inhabit the holy place where he prays. These spirits can penetrate different areas of one's life.

With the crumbling empires of Africa, Senghor is aware of the very specific issues to be dealt with. He prays directly to those spirits behind the masks that can carry out his wishes, allowing the spirits the freedom to bring strength and power to the people of Africa whose hopeless souls need to be infused with new hope and courage.

Themes

Relation to the Ancestors

The figure of the mask is Senghor's central image in the poem of the traditional past and the ancestors for whom it was a living reality. He uses the word "mask" as a kind of incantation to call up the ancestral spirits who in the present, implicitly, are hidden and hard to hear. The "silence" to which the poet refers suggests the need to greet the ancestors with attention and respectful awe. He also notes that the masks are the way that he can access the "breath of my fathers," that is, the living spirit of the ancestors who will inspire the poet to his song. His own face, he writes, resembles the face of the masks, because the masks bear the idealized features of the real faces of the poet's ancestors. The latter part of the poem admits that the ancestral past is in danger of being lost to the forces of modernity, which have come to Africa in the form of the colonial conquests of the French, British, Dutch, and Belgians. The "princess" of line 12 refers to the aristocratic past of the African empires, and in line 14 the "immutable eyes" of the masks suggest both the god-like tranquillity of the ancestors and their inability to do more than witness the sufferings of the present. The poem as a whole wrestles with the question of whether the appeal to the ancestral spirits will be able to help the African overcome the present state of subjugation and hopelessness.

Connection to the Land

Senghor refers to the protected ground of the lion-headed ancestor, a sacred space in which the poet can link himself to the line of "fathers" leading all the way back to the mythic first ancestor, the lion. In the last line, it is the soil itself that transmits its power to the feet of the dancer and by implication, too, to the metrical feet of the poet in writing his poem.

Contrast of Africa and Europe

Africa appears in the poem in a dual light. It is the suffering victim of oppression, economic exploitation, and violence, wrenched from its traditional beliefs and ways of life and forced to serve a foreign master. And it is an irrepressible source of life, creativity, and positive relation to the natural world. Europe, too, is ambivalently presented. It is a kind of cruel mother, on which modern Africa is dependent, yet whose embrace is crushing rather than sustaining. In the questions that make up lines 16-18, the world of Europe appears to be the bleak ground of mechanized industry and war, a space of death, hopelessness, and oblivion. Presently, Africa depends on Europe, while Europe exploits the labor and natural riches of Africa. Yet what Europeans see disdainfully as the African's closeness to nature and the land, seemingly a lack of higher spirituality, the African knows to be a profound spirituality and artistic creativity as symbolized in the final line by the dance.

The Synthesis of African and European Culture

Senghor projects a future overcoming of Africa's subordinate position, through which not only the colonized people of Africa but also the European colonizer stands to benefit. The central image in which this theme is developed is that of bringing the brown yeast of African culture to the white flour of European civilization to make a bread that is higher and more nourishing than either element taken separately. Similarly, lines 16-18 suggest that Africa can become a revitalizing force for European societies that have grown cold, weary, and decadent. It is by embracing the life-affirming aspects of African culture that European culture can refresh itself.

Style

Apostrophe

Senghor often uses the figure of "apostrophe," a term in rhetoric referring to a direct address to an object, a place, an abstraction or ideal, or an immaterial entity such as a god or spirit. In "Prayer to the Masks," he addresses his poem to the masks, which in turn are figures of the ancestors and repositories of mythic powers. Apostrophe characteristically is used to imply the power of the poet's word or voice to wake hidden powers in nature or to bring the dead to life. Thus, in the latter half of "Prayer to the Masks," Senghor implores the masks to join with him in pushing forward the rebirth of Africa, but at the same time implying that it is his poetic "cry" that can compel the cooperation of the masks.

Rhythmic Repetition and Musicality

Senghor uses a strongly cadenced verse, with the rhythm marked by frequent and strongly accented repetitions. Indeed, several of his later poems carry subtitles indicating musical accompaniment by "jazz orchestra with trumpet solo"; by such traditional African instruments as the khalam, tama, gorong, talmblatt, and mbalakh; or by such combinations as flutes and balafong or organs and a tomtom. The opening lines of "Prayer to the Masks," in which the word "mask" is repeated six times, is typical of Senghor's chant-like use of rhythm. The final line, with its evocation of dancing feet beating the ground, is another image of the rhythmic character of the poem itself, a dance of the words across the page.

Use of Analogy

Through his use of analogy, the poet sets in resonance the human and natural worlds, and the historical present with the mythic past. Thus, in the third line, the mask becomes a map that in turn relates to the territory across which the wind blows. The figure of the lion refers at the same time to the father's name, to the mythic lion who was said to be the first ancestor of the family line, to the mask that represents the ancestor's spirit, and to the noble qualities that have communicated themselves through the blood. The image of flour, yeast, and bread in line 16 refer both to the colors associated with Europeans and Africans (white flour and brown yeast) and suggest a future cooperation that will be beneficially "nourishing" to everyone. The image of the "men of cotton, of coffee, of oil" in line 20 brings together the features of the hair and skin of the African with the typical products of his labor.

Contrasts and Oppositions

A steady alternation of opposed lines is a key device in "Prayer to the Masks" and many other poems by Senghor. In the first half of "Prayer to the Masks," for example, Senghor contrasts the ephemeral or frivolous sphere that he associates with women to the serious, eternal ground connected with the lion, the spirit of the fathers. The latter half contrasts Africa as the dying princess with Europe as the mother from which a new Africa will have to separate itself. Similarly, the vitality and life-giving creativity of a future Africa is opposed to the mechanical, death-seeking hopelessness of Europe. The final lines reverse the valuations of the black man by the European. If the European sees the African as an exploitable extension of material goods such as cotton, coffee, and oil, the African knows himself to stand in a creative, joyful, artistic, and religious relationship to the natural riches of Africa.

Historical Context

French Colonialism in Africa

French colonial settlement in Africa dates back to the seventeenth century, when the French were involved in the slave trade both on the African side and in the Caribbean. The trade reached its heights in the middle decades of the eighteenth century and then fell off rapidly with the French Revolution, the wars that rocked Europe in the late eighteenth century, the successful slave revolts in Haiti and elsewhere, and the efforts of humanitarians and enlightenment intellectuals to abolish this ugly denial of human freedom.

A second wave of colonization occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century, with the scramble of the European powers to conquer the territories of Africa, Asia, and Latin America for European colonial empires seen as sources of cheap raw materials, cut-rate labor, and new markets for expanding industrial societies. At the same time, new ideologies began to emerge that "scientifically" justified imperial conquest on grounds of natural and immutable differences of intelligence between the races. French colonialism oscillated between two contradictory sets of values. Convinced of the universal value and legitimacy of French civilization, based on the enlightenment principles that animated the French Revolution, France aggressively sought to "assimilate" the native populations of the colonies. The French language, culture, and history were taught, and the rights and institutions of French politics were extended to the colonized peoples. Yet at the same time, both "scientific" racism and modern ethnography, with its emphasis on the specificity and organic unity of individual cultures, tended to undermine the universalist outlook.

Senghor's personal experience in many ways exemplifies the rather contradictory ways in which these two opposed ideas of how French and native African cultures were related. On the one hand, he was allowed access to the French educational system, in which he excelled, gaining a measure of prestige and respect even within the ordinary channels of French society. He mastered the French language and academic curriculum and eventually earned the equivalent of a Ph.D. in Classics and Literature, going on to teach for a time in a high school outside of Paris. Yet at the same time, as an African born outside the "French" enclaves of Senegal, he had to argue several times for special exceptions to be made to allow him to continue on to higher stages of his education. The more recent ideas about what level and what kind of education was right for the African had led to obstacles to an African's "assimilation" through education in the French system.

Vichy France and World War II

With the outbreak of World War II, men from all over the French empire, including black Africans such as Senghor, were called up or volunteered to fight for France against the

threat posed by Hitler's German army. The French army, however, was quickly defeated, and on July 14, 1940, the Nazis entered Paris. The government fled south to the resort of Vichy; and on the 17th of July, the World War I war hero Marshall Pétain called an armistice that split France between the northern two-thirds under German occupation and a southern piece under the nominally French but collaborationist Vichy regime. Following the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942, the Nazis moved in to occupy the rest of France, ending even the thin premise that the Vichy government was anything but an instrument of the occupiers. With the D-Day invasion and the pushing back of the German army towards the Rhine and across, the liberation of France became the true turning point of the war. Paris was liberated on August 25, 1944, and the leader of the free French forces, General Charles de Gaulle, began the task of rebuilding France's government at home and in the colonies.

Decolonization and Independence

Following World War II, there were broad stirrings throughout the colonized world for independence. Several factors contributed to this movement. The wartime demonstration of the vulnerability of the colonial powers during the German and Japanese occupations and postwar attempts to revive the old colonial hierarchy despite the courageous sacrifices of many natives during the war played a key role. Similarly, the partisan struggle, in which the Communist parties had gained great prestige, and the victory of Mao Zedong's revolutionary army in China helped inspire similar guerrilla movements. The successful struggle for independence from British colonialism in India, led by Ghandi and Nehru, further fueled the sense of colonized peoples that their long-suppressed hopes for self-rule might soon come to fruition. Outright warfare broke out in Vietnam shortly after the war, leading to the defeat of the French army at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. Anti-French riots occurred in Madagascar, Tunisia, and Morocco, and most decisively, in November of 1954 the insurrection in Algeria broke out, a conflict that would lead to the engagement of half a million French soldiers and nearly provoke civil war in France itself. In 1958, in order to stave off a coup attempt by the French army in Algeria, General de Gaulle returned to power and introduced a new constitution. Among the features of the constitution was a referendum of the colonial member states of the French empire allowing them to ratify the constitution or to vote "no" and effectively choose immediate independence. Of the African states, only Guinea chose to vote against the constitution and paid a high price when the French immediately withdrew its resources, expertise, and administrative structure from the newly founded country. The other states sought to form an African federation that would move towards independence, but on friendly terms with France. The Federation failed to take shape, but Senghor's skillful political work and his efforts in finding a third, more moderate road to decolonization allowed Senegal to become independent, with French support, in 1961. Senghor was elected as the first president and governed for the next two decades.

Literary Heritage

Senegal's literary and artistic traditions are connected to the rich heritage of the great African empires of the pre-colonial past, to Islamic culture, and to the oral cultures of the several peoples that occupy its different regions. In his poetry, Senghor refers to the rituals and beliefs associated with masks and other forms of traditional art, to the dance, and to troubadour storytelling accompanied by a wide variety of instruments and drums. Yet the legacy of colonialism also strongly marked this native heritage with the influence of French language and culture. The French colonial administrations placed a particular emphasis on the educational system as a way of spreading the French language and civilization into its colonial territories. Thus, when Senghor entered the French schools, he would have found himself taught the history of a country which he had not even visited, while learning that Africans were inferior and had no proper culture of their own. This division of his cultural heritage between the native land and language of his childhood and the adopted language and learning of his manhood would become a central issue for Senghor in his poetry, politics, and thought. While a student of French and classical literature in Paris in the early thirties, he sought to regain contact with the African culture from which he had been cut off and he took up the study of ethnography and African languages. His entry into political life, which would eventually lead him to the presidency of independent Senegal, was as an investigator and speaker on educational policy, especially about the problem of how best to balance French and native culture in the education of French-African colonial subjects.

Critical Overview

Critics have tended to discuss Senghor's "Prayer to the Masks" along two lines. It is seen as an assertion of the value of African traditions and the African past, including Senghor's own childhood experience; it has also been discussed as Senghor's most hopeful vision of Africa's potential contribution to a new synthetic, global culture that will supersede colonial domination.

Its assertions of the African's spontaneous joyfulness and his attunement to the rhythm of the land and nature, qualities that Senghor opposes to the coldness and despair of the European, are seen as early expressions of the Negritude philosophy that would achieve its greatest influence after World War II. The more hopeful tone of "Prayer to the Masks" connects it with other works in *Chants d'ombre* (*Shadow Songs*) and contrasts with the somber note of the next volume, *Hosties noires* (*Black Hosts* or *Black Victims*), many of the poems of which date from the same period as those collected in the earlier volume.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, Miller considers the problem of an African writer educated in French who wishes to address African themes in his writing. Senghor's poem "Prayer to the Masks" appeared in his first book, *Chants d'Ombre* (*Shadow Songs*), which collected his poems written during the 1930s and early 1940s. These poems reveal the influence of Senghor's original displacement from his homeland to study in France, and their tone oscillates between a melancholic view of Europe as it descended towards war and fascism and an often nostalgic conjuration of the Africa of Senghor's childhood. Yet Senghor's evocation of African traditions, customs, beliefs, and settings should not be seen merely as the nostalgic fantasy of an expatriate poet for his homeland. Behind Senghor's poetic Africa lies a much more comprehensive program for the cultural, educational, and political, the ideal of "negritude" that he would pursue with other black poets of the Caribbean and African colonies. Senghor's early poetry, "Prayer to the Masks" included, explore the predicament of the colonial intellectual trained in the language and culture of the colonizer, while seeking to turn his sense of cultural alienation into a perspective from which to look on his homeland with new eyes.

Within this broader cultural predicament, moreover, lies a more focused artistic problem for the French-African poet: how to relate his acquired artistic medium of expression, the poem written in the French language and European verse forms, to the African content he seeks to express. Senghor addresses this artistic challenge by referring his poem to the traditional African art form of the mask. The African masks, as the object of his "prayer" and the native corollary of his French poetry, serve as an ideal image in the poem, for they allow Senghor to claim that his poetry is not something foreign and artificial, a break with the traditions of Africa, but an extension of those traditions into new expressive media. In a sense, his poem claims to be another form of mask, a mask made wholly of words, but performing the same function as the more typical mask carved from wood or ivory. Senghor suggests that it is the spirit that occupies the art work and not the material that it is made of that invests it with its power. The test of the carved object and of the shaped words of a poem are their fidelity to the ancestors, the source of their sacred energies. Similarly, in his conclusion to the poem, Senghor rejects the colonialist's image of the black African as "men of cotton, of coffee, of oil." Just as with the traditional and modern works of art, for Senghor it is not the materials, but the spirit that dwells in the material that shows the true value of these men. The vital forces they manifest in the dance, their musical and rhythmic relation to their land, are the genuine measure of their worth, not the narrowly economic standard of profits and payments.

Although the image of the mask in the poem is comprehensible without any deeper knowledge of African thinking about masks, this background of belief, which Senghor could assume in at least his African readers, enriches the symbolism still further. Masks are utilized in a few specific contexts such as initiations, funerals, or the beginnings and endings of seasonal agricultural labor. They tend to be connected primarily with rural, agrarian peoples and places, such as Senghor's native village, Joal. Ceremonies involving masks are means by which these agrarian communities call up and display for

themselves the events of the mythic past, like the founding of a family line, the settlement of an area, or the defeat of an enemy. By representing and repeating the mythic event in the framework of the present, the masks function to bind the community to its past and to allow its present representatives to draw strength and legitimacy from that past. Masks also serve to channel spiritual forces, coming out of the world of the ancestors and the mythic past into the work of daily life. In this function, they play a dual role, that of trapping energies from the spirit world and that of protecting living humans from the powers of the ghosts, spirits, and demons that surround them. The mask, as it is used in the ritual, allows the dancer to impersonate the spirit and be invested with the spirit's power, but also to trick the spiritual beings and be able to control and manipulate them. In sum, they play a crucial role in helping those societies that use masks to maintain a delicate equilibrium between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors, between present and past, between life and death. To fail to recall the ancestors and their glorious deeds would be to lose touch with the life-giving wellsprings of tradition; yet to grant the dead too much power over the living would be dangerous as well.

While in his poem Senghor generally celebrates the African traditions represented by the masks, this background helps the reader to understand better how this celebration is qualified and ambivalent in ways similar to the cautious attitude towards the dead expressed by the dual function of the mask. Senghor writes a poem about masks in which he claims an analogy between his poem and the traditional mask and a bond between himself and the mythic "lion-headed" ancestor of his father's family line. Clearly, in this respect, Senghor seeks to recall and reactivate the spiritual powers of the ancestors, the dead, the mythic and magical traditions of African ritual. More difficult to perceive, however, is the other, protective face of his poem-prayer. This aspect can be seen in Senghor's *difference* from the traditions and ritual art forms that he appears to be celebrating. His poem, one might say, is a mask that mimics the African past and its ritual forms rather than the undiminished presence and power of that traditional past. For after all, Senghor has chosen to write a poem (and a poem in French at that!) rather than actually carve a mask. His poem is printed on the two-dimensional flatness of paper rather than etched into the rugged graininess of the wood. And it is meant to be read aloud or even silently, so that its lines conjure up the feeling and sense of a ritual, not literally chanted on a ceremonial occasion such as a funeral or seeding of the ground. The drummed and danced rhythms to which his poem alludes are never physically sounded in the poem, however much its metrical accents allow a reader to imagine them. Senghor's poem thus calls upon the strength of the ancestral spirits for its inspiration, but it purposefully weakens the power of these spiritual forces over the poet by reducing them to paper, ink, and words.

Senghor's poetic mask, however, may be turned not only towards the African past, but also towards the French colonial present. In other words, in writing his poetry, Senghor not only mimics the traditional mask of African ceremony, seeking to tap and control its energies, but also adopts the prestigious mask of the French writer and intellectual. This act of masking allows him to show that the cultural power of the French intellectual is not a "natural" result of some essential Frenchness but rather a role for which they and he have been trained to perform. It also enables him to draw upon the formidable power

of the colonizer's culture, while maintaining his separate identity intact and hidden behind the countenance his writing displays in public. In a manner of speaking, Senghor tricks the powerful French "spirit" (or its representatives in the university, the colonial administration, the government) into acting benevolently toward him.

In composing his poem-prayer, then, Senghor is metaphorically donning a kind of paper mask to mimic the carved and ornamented masks of traditional ritual. As a French-African poet, he captures something of the power of African tradition and of French cultural prestige, while not being totally absorbed into either. He needs the ancestral spirits to inspire him, and he fulfills his obligation to them in recalling them in the artistic place of his poem. Yet it is not from the village society and according to the standards of traditional African values that he, the French-educated poet living in Paris, is seeking recognition. Rather, those who will grant him recognition are urban, literate, French speakers, men and women reading him in large cities such as Paris, Dakar, Tangiers, and New York. To succeed as a poet, he must be "African, but not too African," "French, but French with a difference." He must manage the difficult act of expressing a local content and feeling, rooted in his rural Senegalese childhood, in a cosmopolitan form learned through his French education and residency in Paris.

This complex relation of resemblance and difference is captured most explicitly in the difficult eighth, ninth, and tenth lines: "Masks of unmasked faces, stripped of all dimples, all wrinkles, / Who have formed this image, my face bent over the altar of blank paper / In your image, hear me!" The simplified features of the masks are mirrored by the concentrated expression of the poet's own face as he performs his own form of artistic worship, the ritual of sitting down to write poetry. The poet's relation to the ancestral spirits of the mask is not, however, simply a reflection. It is rather a *translation*, a difficult and risky movement between artistic media, between the Serer and the French language, and between the cultural idiom of villages such as Joal and the European cosmopolitan dialect spoken by Parisian intellectuals.

Senghor's poem expresses the wish that this translation of the past into the present might be possible rather than fully convincing the poet or his readers that the wish can bring its promise to life. It is in this sense that it is properly titled a "prayer." Its attitude is prospective, seeking a better, brighter future, and pointing to itself as anticipating a time when African energies and French forms might work in cooperative concert. At present, however, Senghor acknowledges that Africa is suffering the loss of her traditions while the painful and traumatic process of rebirth, which will convulse both Africa and Europe, has not yet occurred. Africa remains bound by the umbilical cord of dependency to Europe, in a state of latency and infancy, unable to separate itself, speak, move, and grow.

Ultimately, Senghor offers his "Prayer to the Masks" as a token of hope, as a single example of all that might be brought to life out of the two cultures that have shaped his life, through their exchanges, cooperative efforts, and mutual translations. Yet he also recognizes that this wishful dream at present remains unfulfilled for both him and his people, and that, like other dreams deferred and opportunities lost, it might still founder on historical realities. It is thus not with complacent surety, but an urgency haunted by

the presence of danger, that Senghor asks: "For who would teach rhythms to a world blasted by machines and guns? / Who would carry the joy-cry to waken the dead and the orphaned at dawn? / Say, who would bring life's memory back to the men of gutted hopes?" His poem uses all the power that Senghor can muster from both cultures to answer: it is our task to try.

Source: Tyrus Miller, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students,* Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

A widely published poet, fiction writer, and critic, Chris Semansky teaches literature and writing at Portland Community College. In this essay, Semansky argues that the locale of "Prayer to the Masks" is Senghor's Parisian flat, a lodging transformed through writing the poem.

Perhaps one of the first questions occurring to readers contemplating "Prayer to the Masks" by Leopold Sedar Senghor is where the poem occurs, more specifically, what is indicated by the sixth line's "this place." A possible answer is Senghor's apartment in Paris. This theory comes from "In Memoriam," the first poem in Senghor's first poetry collection, *Shadow Songs* (1945), the volume also containing "Prayer to the Masks." "In Memoriam" portrays the exiled black African Senghor anxiously considering venturing out of his Paris apartment on a Sunday that also happens to be All Saints Day, a doubly sacred occasion. The poet is in the process of summoning the courage necessary to walk down and into the Parisian streets, meet those "faces of stone" with "blue eyes," those people with "hard hands" who are at once brothers and historical enemies. Senghor writes that his "glass tower," (that is, his apartment building) is filled with "impatient Ancestors" and "Forefathers" whom the poet calls on. Throughout Africa, masks are multifunctional, one of their functions being to breathe life into myths that attempt to explain the origins of daily customs.

Guard my dreams as you did your thin-legged migrant
sons! O Ancestors! Defend the roofs of Paris in this
dominical fog, The roofs that protect my dead. Let me
leave this tower so dangerously secure And descend
to the streets, joining my brothers

"In Memoriam" is an earlier, and one might say, a more immature poem than "Prayer to the Masks" since "In Memoriam" shows the poet asking for *personal* help, entreating the Ancestors to guard his dreams and embolden him enough to join the Parisians outside." Prayer to the Masks," on the other hand, has Senghor calling on the Masks/Ancestors to save *the world,* specifically from the incusions of Europe. As a result of this progress from self-centeredness toward altruism, a theory might be ventured: the longer Senghor remained apart from his homeland, the more religiously mature he became.

While "In Memoriam" shows the poet gazing down upon the roofs and streets of Paris, "Prayer to the Masks" allows readers those pedestrians strolling along lines of words instead of boulevards of buildings to look back and up into the poet's apartment, likely a small space, probably a room serving as both living space and study. Looking up, the pedestrian is able to see only the masks on the walls, but upon entering the building, the poet's room might look this way: on each of the four walls hangs a mask representing one of the four cardinal points. On a table or desk is the "Ancestor with the lion head," perhaps a statue or a mask like the others.

Throughout Africa, masks are multifunctional, one of their functions being to *breathe* life into myths that attempt to explain the origins of daily customs. According to Jean Laude, "masked" ceremonies are

> cosmogonies enacted to reinvigorate time and space.
> By their means an attempt is made to restore humanity
> and the forces entrusted to mankind to the pristine
> which all things lose when subject to time. However,
> they are also truly cathartic displays, during which
> human beings take stock of their place in the universe
> and see life and death depicted in a collective drama
> which gives them a meaning (quoted in Chevalier 639-40).

Like the African cosmogonic ceremony described above, the poet calls upon the masks and the "Ancestor with the lion head" to reinvigorate the time and space of white-dominated Africa and restore the meaning of human existence□if not to its pristine state□to a state reinvigorated through imagining the pristine. When Senghor calls upon the "four cardinal points where the Spirit blows" to save a dying Africa and animate a "deadened" Europe, his invocation can be imagined as a call to hot African winds□ghibilis, samiels, and simooms□ to warm a Europe grown chilly with civilization. But the appeal to the masks can also be interpreted as the private ritual of a writer-in-exile calling upon his four masks to inspire him with the spirit of homeland, to breathe inspiration into the ritual of (his) writing, a ceremony, by the way, often dear to exiles. The poet calls upon the African masks because in them ancestors and (home)land are fused. Ancestors buried in the land decay into and become part of the *ancestral land* from which the masks are presumably made (whether they be of wood, clay, or metal). The masks "exude the immortal air," "the breath of my Fathers," which the poet will inhale. For those less inclined to believing in spirits, the masks can be imagined as in possession of an odor rich with the remembered smell of ancestral land, an emanation the poet inhales as inspiration. In sum, the elaborate complex whereby resurrection of the buried dead into Ancestral masks inspires continuance of the living world can be seen as a poeticization blowing beyond the four borders of a page of poetry, advancing outward into the world's four cardinal points.

Senghor's invocation to the masks can also be seen in the light of African initiation ceremonies where the masked mystagogue incarnates a spirit with whom he initiates an inexperienced youth into adulthood. On the one hand, the poet, separate from the mask, can be said to be an initiate yearning for the ability to harness the magic of words, and, on the other hand, the poet is the masked mystagogue himself, initiating readers, especially Western readers, into the mystery of words and poetry. Senghor also depicts himself as either split between Africa and Europe or having a double identity as both African and European. In other words, Senghor might at times be torn between his African and French identities, and at other times, attempt to be part of both Africa and Europe, even to reconcile them. Indeed, such characterizations correspond with what is written about Senghor's life.

Masks are also apotropaics, charms to ward off evil, like a crucifix or bulb of garlic to protect against vampires. In terms of masks-as-apotropaics, the poet calls upon the masks (as protector Spirits or Ancestors) to guard his lodgings from laughter and his African brethren from the suffering caused by European invasions and colonizations. In addition, the poet calls upon the masks to transform his poem into an apotropaic to protect the "oppressed children" and the "sorrowful princess" of Africa from the harm caused by a Europe "tied to us at the navel" ("tied to us at the navel" could indicate Europe as Africa's parent, especially if the "oppressed children" are African, but it is more likely Europe is to be understood as Africa's child, Africa usually considered home to humanity's ancestors). Apotropaic masks, are in fact, often worn by dancers to harness invisible Spirits for the protection of society. Because such Spirits are powerful, laying hold of them can be dangerous. And so the mask must also protect its wearer from being overwhelmed when channeling the Spirits' power into the community. While Senghor does not specifically call upon his masks to protect him in the same way as he did in "In Memoriam," the masks, or at least, the "Ancestor with the lion head," are thought to be already protecting his room/study "from women's laughter/ and any wry, profane smiles."

The meaning of the "Ancestor with the lion head," is multiple. Senghor's father's name is Basile Diogoye Senghor, Diogoye meaning "the lion" in Senghor's native Serer language (both people and language are known as *Serer,* pronounced "seerear"). In addition to this paternal connection to the lion-headed ancestor, there is the rich cultural symbology associated with lions, meanings differing little between Africa and Europe. For example, among the Bambara, a people dwelling in and just south of Senegal, the lion symbolizes divine knowl edge and occupies a rank in the Bambara traditional social hierarchy only one step below that of priest-sage. The lion, then, can be viewed as a tight complex of identities: Ancestor, source of divine knowledge, protector against frivolousness, guardian of the sacredness of Senghor's study, and as inspiration. The characterization is of a serious parental God for whom divine knowledge is no laughing matter. These Masks/Ancestors/Gods "stripped of every dimple," are *grounded,* are serious chthonic Ancestors, not frivolous Olympian mischief-makers. And though grounded, these Ancestors are still idealized, are eternally unchanging Gods "stripped . . . of every wrinkle." These are dead ancestors resurrected and elevated into Godlike Ancestors who in turn transform the poet into priest, his "face leaning/ On an altar of blank paper," writing his prayer/poem, and chanting his prayer/song.

The origin of gods is thought by some to have been an apotheosis of dead ancestors conceived to live on and guard the living. Senghor builds on this apotheosis by symbolically elevating the status of his room/study into a sanctuary, his desk into an altar, himself (as poet) into priest, and the poem ("Prayer to the Masks") he is writing into a sacred document or prayer. Typical of prayer, Senghor's "Prayer to the Masks" is an entreaty to the Masks/ Ancestors/Gods to save Africa from Europe and grant Africa the role of leavening the "white flour" of Western civilization, inspiring it to rise to new heights by, paradoxically, bringing it back to earth, back to expressions of joy, rhythm, and dance, back to poem, psalm, and prayer. In the same way Senghor recognizes that "white flour" must be leavened by black African influence, "Prayer to the Masks" shows

how empty *white* paper can be "leavened" into poem, prayer, psalm, and possibly into scripture by black ink.

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

In the following brief essay on Senghor's A Dance of Masks*, Jonathan Peters examines the artistic, spiritual and political implications held by the traditional piece of African art, the mask.*

In "Prière aux Masques" Senghor, as poet of Negritude, shows his concern with the white world. The title suggests that the poem is a prayer to the gods and spirits who watch over his race. It is more than just a prayer, however, for it contains a basic statement of Senghor's poetic credo.

An obvious distinction of "Prière aux Masques" is that unlike "Femme noire" and "Masque nègre" not one but several masks are involved and their summons from the four cardinal points stresses the importance of the occasion:

Black mask, red mask, you black-and-white masks
I greet you in silence!
Masks of the four points from which the
Spirit breathes

(*PO*)

Senghor scrupulously follows the alphabetic order in his salutation to the masks□"*B*lack mask, *r*ed mask, you *b*lack-and-*w*hite masks"□as he paints them in black, red and white, the colours of traditional Africa. His greeting is a silent one of reverence in a place whose very air smacks of eternity in its isolation from all contact with the profane.

Although the primary intent of the invocation is a plea to the masks, something of their character is revealed in the last lines of the preliminary address which takes up half the poem:

You distill this air of eternity in which I breathe
the air of my Fathers.
Masks with faces without mask, free from all
dimples and wrinkles
You who have composed this portrait, this face of
mine bent over the altar of white paper
In your own image, hear me!

(*PO*).

In these lines is something of the paradox inherent in the African mystique, at least from a Western standpoint. In African art the mask is a symbolic representation of the human face, which is, in Senghor's words, "the most faithful reflection of the soul." Far from hiding or disguising the identity beyond it, the sacred African mask reveals in its form and texture the character of the deity it represents. The sacred masks in this poem are

therefore "without mask" because they illumine the presence of the very founders of the race. There is on the one hand an image-analogy between the face of the suppliant and the sacred mask-Fathers who have modelled his face, and on the other a contrast between his own face and the "altar of white paper," which is consecrated because it is used to record the prayer to the masks.

Following the appeal for the masks' kindly audience, Senghor proceeds to the prayer proper. The subsequent six lines of the poem present black Africa and white Europe as objective correlatives:

See the Africa of empires dying□it is the agony
of a pitiful princess
And Europe too to whom we are linked by
the navel.
Fix your immobile eyes on your children who
receive orders
Who give away their lives like the poor man his
last garment.
Let us answer "Present!" at the rebirth of
the world
As the leaven that the white flour needs.

(*PO*).

The future of the two continents is inextricably linked because they have the same life line. Thus the death of Africa, the proud and pitiful princess, also spells doom for Europe. The African empires which held sway up to the nineteenth century have been disintegrating under European influence and the Second World War threatens the life of Europe torn by an inward struggle, a struggle in which the black man has been called upon to sacrifice his life for peace. But after this physical death, a new world will be born in which Africa will again have a key function, "[a]s the leaven that the white flour needs." This last phrase suggests that the black man will be charged with the task of infusing a spiritual essence into a world that is for all practical purposes white□and sterile. There ensues an elaboration of the black man's role in a question and answer situation followed by an affirmation of that role:
For who will teach rhythm to the world laid low
by machines and cannons
Who will shout with joy to wake up the dead and
the orphans at the dawn?
Say, who will give back the memory of life to the

man with eviscerated hopes?
They call us cotton men, coffee men oily men
They call us men of death.
We are the men of the dance, whose feet regain
force by drumming on the hard earth.

(*PO*).

The implication here is that only the black man who has maintained a constant connection with the world of nature and the world of spirits can fulfil this vital task, for the Caucasian, in his preoccupation with a machine civilization, has brought the world to ruin by this very machine. The Negro, who has up till the present been the downtrodden of the earth will then become the hero and the apostle of the dawn of tomorrow's world. He will make it rise, phoenix-like, from its own ashes.

The assertion of the black man's contribution is made with full awareness of his current existential position. He has many stereotypes, all of them revealing a bias above all against his colour, which forces on him a myth of inferiority. Ironically Senghor reverts to a European myth, that of the Greek Antaeus, to make his final postulate about the black man's identity as well as about his role: "We are the men of the dance, whose feet regain force by drumming on the hard earth."

The Messianic note of much poetry of Negritude is present in the questions that are posed in "Prière aux Masques." The apocalyptic day of destruction caused by the machines of white culture is to be followed by a day of resurrection achieved through the rhythmic flow of sap from a "civilisation sans machine." Inasmuch as rhythm is the correlative principle of death and life and similar dualities only beings endowed with it can infuse the vital sap into the deadened nerve centre of occidental civilization. According to Senghor, the Negro reigns supreme in the domain of rhythm; consequently, it will be his duty to teach the resuscitated world the rhythm of life and to announce the Good News in the impending dawn□an honour he has by virtue of his retention of the vital link with the cosmic forces ruling the universe as he dances the dance of the world.

What Senghor seems to have done in "Prière aux Masques" is to accept part of the Negro stereotype which he then modifies at the same time as he tacitly rejects the other half. The physical characteristics of the Negro ("cotton men coffee men oily men") which also refer to his humble or peasant status have been sublimated in "Femme noire" and "Masque nègre." What cannot be accepted here is that black is the colour of death; for Senghor, black is the colour of life, and the blackness of the Negro has this special significance for him in marked contrast with the Caucasian's identification of black with death. In any event death and life are twin aspects of the same reality. In particular, in Africa "there is no irreducible opposition between life and death." As "men of the dance," therefore, the black race engages in a dance celebrating the renewing cycle of life and death. . . .

Source: Jonathan Peters, in *A Dance of Masks,* Three Continents Press, 1978, pp. 28-31.

Topics for Further Study

Discuss how Senghor depicts the past, present, and future in his poem. How does the present relate to the traditional African past? What role will the tradition play in the future of Africa?

Senghor's poem draws strongly on a patriarchal myth that evokes his father's name and the masculine totemic animal of the lion, while excluding women from this sacred "ground" protected by the lion-mask. Yet he also uses feminine imagery of the "dying princess" of traditional Africa and the umbilical cord attaching Africa to the colonial "mother" of Europe. How does "Prayer to the Masks" relate gender to his vision of the Africa of the past, present, and future? How do you think the poem might have differed if it had been written by an African woman?

Senghor was a central participant in the "Negritude" movement, a literary and cultural movement that asserted pride in being black and in the traditions of Africa and of the African peoples brought to the Americas as slaves. Other important participants included the Martiniquean poet Aimé Césaire and the Guyanese poet Léon Gontran Damas. In what ways might the idea of Africa and African roots be different for Senghor, who grew up in a small village in Senegal, and the "New World" Negritude poets, who had never been to Africa when they began writing?

Senghor was educated in French schools and universities, and he wrote in French. Yet he also uses French, the language of the colonizer, to criticize colonialism and to assert the value of African traditions, history, and beliefs. What sorts of problems do you think his literary use of French might have posed for Senghor in writing his poems? What did he gain by writing in French? Would it have been better for him to have written his poetry in Serer, his native language? What does Senghor bring to French literature and language from an African perspective? How does Senghor's use of the French language relate to his vision of future relations between Africa and Europe?

Senghor puts at the center of his work a form of African art and spirituality, the mask. Find another poem that takes off from a work of art and compare how it functions in that work with the role of the masks in Senghor's poem.

The African-American scholar and writer W. E. B. Du Bois argued that being both a highly educated American citizen and a man subject to American racial prejudice caused him to possess a "double consciousness" typical of the experience of blacks in America. He was compelled to think of himself both as a legally equal citizen of the United States and as a socially stigmatized black man, to live his life as a man aware of his superior education and accomplishments and as a man viewed by many of his fellow citizens as inferior because of his race. In what ways does Senghor's poem, which negotiates a relation between his pride in his "negritude," his aspirations for African independence, and his French education, exhibit a similar "double consciousness"? How do the particular circumstances of Africa and French colonialism

differ from the American racism and legacy of slavery to which Du Bois was responding?

Compare and Contrast

1903: W. E. B. Du Bois publishes *The Souls of Black Folk*, declaring that the problem of our epoch is the problem of the "color line."

1928: Claude McKay publishes his novel *Banjo*, which champions Caribbean "folk" cultures and raises important issues about tensions between blacks in the Caribbean and Africans. The novel was intensely discussed among the African and Caribbean students in Paris, including the founders of the "Negritude" movement.

1934: Parisian poet-students Senghor, Césaire, and Damas found the journal *L'Etudiant Noir* (*The Black Student*), widely seen as the first important landmark in the Negritude cultural movement.

1916: Marcus Garvey arrives in Harlem from his native Jamaica and declares that the future of the black people of the world lies in rejecting the barriers to greatness set down by white society and entreats them to return to Africa. His Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) has a membership ranging from 2 to 4 million people.

1933: Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist Party come to power in Germany. Hitler propagates a viciously racist ideology that views the white, Nordic "Aryan" race as superior and those Jewish, Slavic, and black descent as inferior, subhuman races, worthy of enslavement and extermination. These views become the official policy of the German state, which begins preparations for war and conquest.

1955: Rosa Parks refuses to move to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, beginning a year-long bus boycott and launching the movement to desegregate all public facilities in the southern United States.

1968: Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King is assassinated.

1990: Nelson Mandela, leader of the anti-apartheid African National Congress in South Africa, is released from prison after twenty-seven years of incarceration. Four years later he is elected the first president of South Africa following the fall of apartheid, and serves for five years.

1919: British soldiers in India massacre large numbers of unarmed protesters at the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar.

1931: Nine young black men are arrested in Scottsboro, Alabama for the alleged rape of two white girls, one of whom later withdraws her accusation. Eight are sentenced to death and the ninth, a thirteen-year-old, to life in prison. The case, thought by many to be fabricated and a shameful expression of white racism, drags on for years, leading to several mistrials and the eventual dropping of charges or paroling of the defendants.

1945: The Nazi concentration camps are liberated by the Allies, revealing to the world the military-industrial system in which six million Jews and hundreds of thousands of other peoples considered racially or politically "inferior" were exterminated.

1960: Police kill sixty-seven young black protesters and wound 186 in Sharpesville, South Africa.

1994: Between April and July 1994, more than 800,000 mostly Tutsi civilians in Rwanda are massacred by their Hutu neighbors. Despite extensive media reporting, the international response is slow and does little to stop the killing. □

1961: Senegal gains independence, with Léopold Sédar Senghor as its first president.

1975: Mozambique and Angola gain independence from Portugal.

1980: Senghor retires from the presidency of Senegal.

What Do I Read Next?

Senghor's *On African Socialism* collects three important essays outlining his vision of nationhood and the special nature of African societies on the road to national development and socialism. These works are considered classics of modern African political philosophy.

Ujaama: Essays on Socialism, by the Tanzanian leader Julius Nyerere, is a useful point of comparison to Senghor's political thought.

Janet G. Vaillant's biography of Senghor, *Black, French, and African: A Life of Léopold Sédar Senghor*, offers extensive context for Senghor's education, political activities, and friendships with writers and statesmen. It is clearly and accessibly written.

Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* is a book-length poem, partially in prose and partially in verse, that recounts the homecoming to Martinique of this poet, friend of Senghor, and comrade in the negritude movement. Symbolically, it enacts the rebirth of the black poet beyond the partial, damaged selfimages he had taken over from both black and white perceptions of him.

The Negritude Poets, edited by Ellen Conroy Kennedy, presents a wide selection of poets from Africa, the Caribbean, and the French-speaking island nations of the Indian Ocean, Madagascar and Mauritius, who were inspired by the negritude movement. The volume provides a useful context for the founding poets□Senghor, Césaire, and Damas□and shows the wide influence of their example and ideas.

Franz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* is a brilliant and influential exploration of the problem of personal identity in a racially divided, colonial society. Written while he was studying psychiatry in Paris after World War II, Fanon's book gives a very powerful, poetic account of his confrontation with French racism, but also with his own false self-conceptions as a French-educated colonial subject from Martinique. The analogies and differences of Senghor's and Fanon's experiences as students in Paris are instructive.

Further Study

Bâ, Sylvia Washington, *The Concept of Negritude in the Poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor*, Princeton University Press, 1973.

Bâ discusses Senghor's poetry using the concept of negritude and the background of African philosophy as her focus.

Hymans, Jacques Louis, *Léopold Sédar Senghor: An Intellectual Biography*, Edinburgh University Press, 1971.

Very good historical and biographical study that discusses Senghor's work and thought within the broader tendencies of African and negritude philosophy.

Sartre, Jean-Paul, "Orphée Noir," in his *Situations III*, Gallimard, 1949, pp. 229-86.

This essay was Sartre's controversial introduction to Senghor's 1948 anthology of negritude poets.

Senghor, Léopold Sédar, *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, Presses universitaires de France, 1948.

Senghor's celebrated and influential anthology of negritude poets.

□□□, *The Collected Poetry*, translated by Melvin Dixon, University Press of Virginia, 1991.

A full edition of Senghor's poetry in English translation.

□□□, *The Foundations of "Africanité" or "Négritude" and "Arabité,"* translated by Mercer Cook, Presence Africaine, 1971.

A lecture given by Senghor in Cairo in 1967 in which he discusses the shared roots of North and Sub-Saharan Africa and the potential cooperation between Arab and Black Africans.

□□□, *Selected Poems*, edited by Abiola Irele, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

An edition of the poems in the original French, with an informative introduction and annotations to the poems.

□□□, *Selected Poems / Poésies Choisies*, translated by Craig Williamson, Rex Collings, 1976.

A bilingual facing-page selection of Senghor's poem, with a helpful introduction.

Spleth, Janice, *Léopold Sédar Senghor*, Twayne Publishers, 1985.

A basic survey of all the poetry and the personal and intellectual context of Senghor's writing.

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BOOKRAGS

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Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

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Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and

undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LDNfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LDNfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LDNfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LDNfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LDNfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literature of Developing Nations for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LDNfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LDNfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literature of Developing Nations for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literature of Developing Nations for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Literature of Developing Nations for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535