

The Palm-wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-wine Tapster in the Dead's Town Study Guide

The Palm-wine Drinkard and His Dead Palm-wine Tapster in the Dead's Town by Amos Tutuola

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Plot Summary

The young palm-wine drinkard drinks truly staggering amounts of palm-wine until the day his tapster dies. The drinkard goes off on a quest to find the tapster, journeying through a dangerous jungle and fighting many scary monsters on his way to Deads' Town. Although the tapster does not return with him, the drinkard does return with a beautiful wife and a magic egg.

When the palm-wine drinkard hears that the dead do not go straight to heaven but live in other towns, he decides to go find his dead tapster. The drinkard is out of wine and wants more. Early in his journey, he is asked to rescue a beautiful young girl who is being held captive by a family of Skulls. The drinkard uses his tricks to save the girl and marries her. She joins him in his travels. They encounter many strange towns with strange people living in them. Some of the people are "deads" or spirits, and some are very cruel to the drinkard and his wife. One day, the wife's thumb miraculously gives birth to a boy. The drinkard and his wife murder their child when he turns out to be a monster that destroys everything around him. After they kill their baby, it is born again and chases them around. They face many monsters in the jungle and barely escape.

On the way, the couple sells their deaths, so they no longer need to worry about dying. When they finally get to Deads' Town, the couple can not go in because they are still alive. The tapster is happy to see them and gives them a lot of wine, which the drinkard drinks immediately. The tapster also gives them a magic egg which can grant all kinds of wishes if placed in water. The couple moves on and settles for a while in a town where the drinkard works as a judge. When the cases start to push the limits of his wisdom, he and his wife go back to his hometown.

In the drinkard's hometown, everyone is starving from a terrible famine. It seems Heaven and Land have had an argument, and as a result Heaven is denying rain from Land. The drinkard places the magic egg in water, and it produces so much food that people come from all around to get food. In their haste to take food, the people break the egg, and it will not make any more food. Finally, they send a sacrifice to Heaven, and it begins to rain, so the famine is ended.



Pages 191-207

Pages 191-207 Summary

The palm-wine drinkard is the oldest son of the richest man in a town in Nigeria. This child, whose name is "Father of gods who could do anything in this world," is so good at drinking massive quantities of palm-wine that his father assigns him the job of drinking wine. The drinkard has his own palm tree farm and a tapster who taps wine for him to drink with his friends. One day, the tapster falls out of the tree drunk and dies. The drinkard buries him and then drinks up the remaining wine. He quickly finds that his friends disappear when there is no wine, and no one can tap the trees like the dead tapster. The drinkard hears that the dead do not go to heaven right away but that they go live in other towns far away. He makes up his mind to go find his tapster, and bring him back.

In the first town the drinkard comes to, a man claims to know where the tapster is, but says he will only share his knowledge if the drinkard will go get Death in a net and bring him back. The man is surprised and frightened when the drinkard uses trickery to catch Death, but the man runs away, fearing for his life. The drinkard moves on.

In the next town, the head of the town really does know where the tapster is. He tells the drinkard that he will only tell him if the drinkard can bring back his daughter, who has been carried away by a curious creature from the market. The daughter is very beautiful but does not wish to marry any of the men who ask for her. However, one day in the market she sees a complete gentleman, so handsome that she follows him into the forest, despite his protests. When they have gotten too far into the jungle for the girl to turn back, the gentleman starts returning his body parts to the people from whom he rented them. As he loses body parts, the gentleman has to crawl on the ground, until he is nothing but a skull. The girl tries to run away, but the skull can jump a mile in a single leap, and he forces the girl to go home with him, which is a hole in the ground. There she is made to sit on a large frog, and skulls guard her to keep her from running away.

Pages 191-207 Analysis

Although the story starts out straightforward enough, like any ordinary folk tale or fairy tale, it quickly becomes grotesque, with a portrait of the house of the personification of Death. Death, although subject to human weaknesses like pride and gullibility, shows he is something to be afraid of with his disgusting decor, which basically consists of rotting corpses. Death does not, however, seem to understand human nature very well, since he assumes the drinkard is asleep when Death comes in to kill his guest in the night. Yet the drinkard is not sleeping in the bed, since it is made of dead people. Apparently Death is not very good with hospitality. The Skull, however, would do well to visit Death, since he does not have enough body parts and would happily take some of Death's old furniture. The Skull is just as bad a host as Death and just as grotesque. Now the tale is



truly monstrous. While Death lives in a house, the kidnapped girl must use a grave for a house.

The importance of names comes up, with the drinkard seeing merit in living up to the name given by one's parents. "I was about to refuse to go and find out his daughter who was taken away from the market by a curious creature, but when I remembered my name I was ashamed to refuse." (Chapter 1, p. 201) Since the drinkard's name is "Father of gods who could do anything in this world," this raises the question of whether he really can do anything in this world. It also explains why the afterlife seems to take place in this world, so the drinkard can have power.



Pages 207-217

Pages 207-217 Summary

The drinkard goes to the market place and sees the complete gentleman who has carried off the girl. The drinkard follows this man into the jungle, and sure enough, the man returns all his body parts to those who loaned them to him. The drinkard, disguised as a lizard, sneaks into the hole, and when the skull family is outside, he tells the girl he is there to rescue her. Unfortunately, the skulls have tied a magic cowrie shell around the girl's neck, which makes her unable to eat or speak, and which makes a loud noise if she tries to run away. The drinkard transforms both of them and manages to take her back to her own town. He can not seem to take the cowrie shell off her neck, though, so she can not eat or speak, so he again uses his trickery to find out the answer from the skulls. Using the right juju, he takes the cowrie off her, and they get married.

One day when they are living in the wife's hometown, the wife's thumb swells up and bursts, and a half-grown boy comes out. His parents are frightened of their godlike son and with good reason. The child turns out to have superhuman powers and eats everything in sight. He grows at an astounding rate, and when he throws a temper tantrum, he destroys everything he can reach. When the child refuses to allow anyone else to eat, the drinkard decides it is time to leave the child behind. He waits until his son is asleep in a building, then burns down the building. Everyone is happy to be rid of the nuisance.

Pages 207-217 Analysis

It becomes apparent that "Father of gods who could do anything in this world" is an appropriate name for the drinkard, since his son is obviously superhuman. This child, with his insatiable appetite, mirrors the drinkard's own appetite for palm-wine, and there is not room in the world for two such appetites. Even acknowledging that the child is some sort of god, the boy is still a monster, destroying anything he can. The child is strong enough to beat a hundred men and also kills all the pets and livestock. Even the child's parents are powerless to stop him. Still, it is shocking and brutal that the main character murders his only child.



Pages 217-223

Pages 217-223 Summary

The drinkard's wife remembers she left a piece of gold jewelry in the house they burned down and insists on going back to look for it. When she sifts through the ashes, the spirit of their murdered son rises up from the ashes, in the form of a "half-bodied baby." (Chapter 12, p. 218) The baby forces his parents to carry him around and will not let them set him down, though he is very heavy. The baby keeps stealing food from the parents and swells up hugely. They hear music, and the baby wants to go listen.

The family encounters the personifications of Drum, Song, and Dance. They all form a procession, singing and dancing as they go along, with the most compelling music and dance in the world. Finally, in the middle of the night, the parents sneak off, leaving the baby with Drum, Song, and Dance. The drinkard and his wife come to a river but have no money and no way to cross it. The drinkard turns himself into a canoe, and for a month, his wife runs a ferry service, raising money for traveling expenses. Finally, the drinkard and his wife come to the town where the tapster is said to have gone. The people there say that the tapster left two years earlier and went to Deads' Town. The drinkard decides to travel there, but there is no road leading to Deads' Town.

Pages 217-223 Analysis

A very strange picture of death begins to emerge from the story. It is possible that when the drinkard's wife wants to go back for her jewelry that this symbolizes guilt over killing her child. Then, both parents are forced to carry the crushing weight of guilt for their crime. Their main complaint with the child is that he is heavy and wants to be carried, and he eats the food that the parents themselves want to eat. Yet these characteristics are true of any baby. Once again, the line between death and life is blurred, both by the resurrection of the child and by the description of how to get to Deads' Town. There is no road going from the towns of the living to the Deads' Town.

In addition to fanciful portrayal of death and guilt, even music is given a human form. "So nobody in this world could beat drum as Drum himself could beat, nobody could dance as Dance himself could dance and nobody could sing as Song himself could sing." (Chapter 13, p. 221) Such magical persons and events are contrasted with multiple references to specific times of day and specific amounts of money. After all the magic that has happened, the most productive event still turns out to be running a ferry service.



Pages 223-230

Pages 223-230 Summary

Since there is no road to the Deads' Town, the drinkard and his wife must travel through the bush, which is thick, almost-impenetrable jungle. One night they meet a huge white monster and are afraid it is going to eat them. The drinkard uses a charm to transform himself and his wife into a great fire, thinking to scare away the white creature.

Unfortunately, it turns out that the white creature is very cold, and he goes and gets all his friends, and the white creatures spend the evening warming themselves at the fire. The drinkard and his wife eventually manage to move on to a very strange town. They make camp under a termite house that they find. In the morning, it turns out that the owner of the market looks exactly like a termite house, and the drinkard has insulted him by making camp. However, when the drinkard tells them his real name, they are impressed and let him go.

The drinkard and his wife settle for a little while in a swamp island named Wraith-Island. The drinkard incurs the wrath of a local god when he forgets to sacrifice his fruits to the god. After he does, the god gives him various magic seeds that will bloom as soon as they are planted.

Pages 223-230 Analysis

The drinkard and his wife can not be blamed for laying their packs on, sleeping under, and making a fire under owner of the market. The man is three feet tall, cream colored, and shaped like an umbrella. The magic seeds that the drinkard receives are reminiscent of some type of magic seeds that often appear in various folk tales from all over the world; for example, "Jack and the Beanstalk." They represent infinite potential. In a way, seeds in real life have infinite potential, since the fruit produced by a single seed can feed people or be used to plant more crops.



Pages 230-248

Pages 230-248 Summary

At the next town, the king gets everyone in town to help him clear his fields for planting but does not ask the tiniest creature in the forest. This tiny creature is offended, so he gets revenge by making all the spirits of the forest to cause all the weeds to grow up again each night, as though the field were never cleared. The drinkard figures this out and convinces the tiny creature to stop.

Traveling gets more dangerous. The drinkard and his wife encounter one fearsome creature after another, and most of the creatures want to eat them. Finally, they come to the worst town of all, Unreturnable-Heaven's Town. In Unreturnable-Heaven's Town, the people do everything backwards. This is a sort of gruesome climax to the story, with the most appalling descriptions of the people's behavior. The people tie up their guests and torture them for several days on end. The people try several times to shave the heads of the drinkard and his wife, using progressively sharper implements with which to scrape their wounded heads.

The children of the town are the worst of all. After the people have buried the drinkard and his wife up to their necks, ". . . their children came with whips and stones then they began to whip and stone our heads; when they left that, they began to climb on our heads and jump from one to the second; after that they started to spit, make urine and pass excreta on our heads; but when that eagle saw that they wanted to nail our heads, then it drove all of them away from the field with its beak." (Chapter 18, p. 243) The eagle takes pity on the couple because while the drinkard and his wife are languishing in the hot sun, the drinkard tames the eagle. Finally, the couple escapes and runs away.

As the drinkard and his wife walk past a white tree, they hear a voice telling them to stop and go no farther. They are afraid and keep going, but a giant pair of hands comes out of the tree and drags them inside. There they find a woman who helps them. Her name is Faithful-Mother, and she helps out travelers in the forest, as long as they are good people and not killers. It is a good thing for the drinkard and his wife that Faithful-Mother did not see them kill their own child. The hands that pull them into the tree are the brother of Faithful-Mother, called Faithful-Hands. Faithful-Hands helps out Faithful-Mother by bringing her any travelers who need her help, since Faithful-Mother has to stay in the white tree.

Pages 230-248 Analysis

In addition to the various monsters, even the landscape of the bush is dangerous. Much like Tantalus of Greek mythology, the drinkard and his wife try to drink from a pond, but the water always draws back just as their lips touch it. The couple even sees the personification of hunting. ". . . we saw a "Spirit of Prey," he was big as a hippopotamus,



but he was walking upright as a human-being; his both legs had two feet and tripled his body, his head was just like a lion's head and every part of his body was covered with hard scales . . ." (Chapter 17, p. 235) As strange as all the characters are, they also find the humans to be strange because they have never seen humans before. This is truly the deep jungle, where human contact is unknown. The road is hard, just like in life. The drinkard sees that the road is going to be hard no matter which direction he goes, so he chooses the path of least resistance.



Pages 248-264

Pages 248-264 Summary

The white tree turns out to be far bigger on the inside than the outside. Faithful-Mother cares for the couple in her hospital, where they convalesce until their hair grows back. They explore the wonderful town inside the white tree. It is a type of paradise, and the drinkard spends much of his time there gambling. He and his wife sell their deaths and loan out their fear, and then the drinkard gambles away the money from selling their deaths. After they have been in the white tree for a year, Faithful-Mother says it is time for them to move on and gives them gifts of a gun, a cutlass, food, drink, and cigarettes to take on their journey. They wake up in the bush again, as though the stay in the white tree were a dream, but they still have the gifts from Faithful-Mother.

Soon the couple meets a woman who is all red. She takes them to her town, Red-Town, where everyone and everything is red. She explains that this is the result of someone catching a magic red fish and a magic red bird. The Red-Lady, who turns out to actually be the personification of Dance, tells the drinkard how every year, they must sacrifice someone from their town to the fish and the bird. She is happy that the drinkard is there, hoping that he or his wife will volunteer to be the sacrifice. The drinkard agrees because he remembers that he no longer has his death.

The drinkard waits until the huge, floating red spirit animals come out of their hole in the ground, looking forward to eating him. The drinkard uses the gun from Faithful-Mother to kill both magic red animals, and goes to tell the people of Red-Town, who are no longer red. The people become scared that the drinkard will come kill them all and take their property, so they burn down the entire town to keep him from getting it. He finds two red trees where the town was, and these trees are actually all the people, in disguise. The drinkard and his wife settle in another town, and he plants the magic seeds from Wraith-Island. He has a very good harvest.

Pages 248-264 Analysis

Here is yet another confusing attitude toward death. Apparently, someone wants to buy death from mortals and gives them money for it. This is strange, considering that most people would like to pay someone to take their death away. Nonetheless, the drinkard loses his death-money gambling anyway.

The Red-Lady shows quite a contrast between the fantastical aesthetic of the deep bush, and more modern, Western fashions. ". . . she was dressed in a long fancy gown, and there were many gold-beads around her neck and she wore high-heel shoes which resembled aluminium in colour, she was as tall as a stick of about ten feet long, she was of deep red complexion." (Chapter 20, p. 253) The Red-Lady is modern enough to wear



silver-colored high heels, which are about the least appropriate shoes possible for this setting. This is contrasted by using the measuring tool "a stick of about ten feet long."

The drinkard's wife begins to show herself a prophetess, advising her husband as to the best course of action. First, when he is afraid to face the red animals, she points out that they can not hurt him, saying, "This is only fear for the heart but not dangerous to the heart." (Chapter 20, p. 253) Later, when they are asked to volunteer to sacrifice their lives, the wife assures her husband that they will be back together soon. "But my wife said these words— "This would be a brief loss of woman, but a shorter separation of a man from lover." But I did not understand the meaning of her words, because she was talking with parables or as a foreteller." (Chapter 21, p. 257)



Pages 265-274

Pages 265-274 Summary

One night, a very poor man comes to see the drinkard, and asks the drinkard to hire him as a pawn, or permanent hired worker. The drinkard agrees, although he can not see the pawn, who only shows up during the night. The pawn performs amazing feats but always overdoes it. He always uses up any available supplies and makes a huge mess. Whatever the task he is asked to do, he does it so much that everyone in the town gets angry at him; finally the pawn steals all the food of the town. When the townspeople react angrily, the pawn comes back in the night with all his friends and kills everyone in the town, except for the drinkard and his wife.

While they are traveling toward Deads' Town, they meet a man who is carrying a heavy load. He asks them to help him carry it and then will not let them put it down until they come to the next town. They complain that the bag is very heavy and could contain a person's body. It turns out that the bag contains the body of the prince of that town, whom the man has killed. When the man claims the drinkard killed the prince, the king dresses the drinkard in fine clothes and parades him around the town for a week, to prepare him to be put to death. The man who really killed the prince sees this wonderful treatment and thinks that the king is happy about his son's death. The prince-killer claims his rightful position and is put to death.

The drinkard and his wife keep thinking that they are almost at the Deads' Town but never seem to get there. Then the wife finds out that they can only travel there at night, and they quickly arrive at Deads' Town during the night time.

Pages 265-274 Analysis

Once again, the drinkard's wife demonstrates her talent for prophecy, with the invisible-pawn. ". . . but my wife said that the man would be a— "WONDERFUL HARD WORKER, BUT HE WOULD BE A WONDERFUL ROBBER IN FUTURE."" (Chapter 22, p. 265) In fact, the pawn is far too hard of a worker, destroying everything in his zeal to harvest. For instance, when the drinkard asks the pawn to get him some meat, the pawn covers the entire town with dead animals, so no one can even walk through them. The wife also predicts that the entire town will be slaughtered, except for the drinkard and his wife.

It seems symbolic that one can only enter Deads' Town at night. This is somewhat like saying that one can only enter it after death.



Pages 274-285

Pages 274-285 Summary

The drinkard and his wife finally make it to Deads' Town. They have to be careful how they travel, because the dead are very sensitive and get angry if people do things in the living way. The dead will only tolerate people walking backwards, even though the drinkard can not see where he is going. When he cuts his leg, the dead get very upset because they hate the sight of blood. The drinkard also notices that in Deads' Town, black and white people live side by side. The living can not enter the Deads' Town, so when the drinkard finds his tapster, the tapster builds the drinkard a little house outside the town.

The tapster and drinkard are happy to see one another and catch up. It has been ten years since the tapster's death. He is not even aware of how he died, although when the drinkard tells him that he was found at the foot of a tree after falling out of it, the tapster says that he must have "over-drunk" that day. The drinkard introduces the tapster to his wife and tells him of all their adventures on the way to get him.

The tapster explains how after dying, he could not go directly to Deads' Town but had to first go through a two-year training period, learning how to be a dead man. Then he came to Deads' Town. Unfortunately, the tapster can not come back and stay among the living. Instead, he gives the drinkard a magic egg. He tells the drinkard that he must guard the egg as though it were made of gold. If he places the egg in water, it will give him anything in the world that he wants. The tapster gives lots of food and palm-wine to the drinkard, who drinks it all.

The drinkard and his wife turn back, and the tapster tells them to take a different road, which is much shorter. Along the road, the couple meets various dead spirits who frighten them. Some of the first people they encounter are a group of 400 dead babies, heading to Deads' Town. Although the drinkard and his wife try to sneak peacefully past, the dead babies have sharp sticks, and chase them off the path, beating them with the sticks.

Wandering around off the path, the drinkard and his wife are captured by a giant, who puts them into a huge sack. The sack is big enough to hold 45 people and made of such a strong material they can not break free. The drinkard knows there are other fearsome creatures in the bag with them, but they can not even see what the monsters look like. They know that the creatures are terrible because they can feel them, and the creatures seem cold, hot, hairy, and sharp.

Pages 274-285 Analysis

Here is yet another strange border between life and death: it seems that the dead live much like the living, except often backwards. Yet going from life to death is not an easy



transition but takes years to prepare for. This especially makes the drinkard seem like a hero, since he seems to have made it to Deads' Town without any training. This is evocative of many tales around the world, in which the hero, who is often part god, makes a journey to the underworld or afterlife. Usually the hero is seeking someone he loves, such as a lover, so it is quite original that the drinkard braves the forces of death in order to get someone to make him a drink.

In classical stories of travel to the underworld, the hero usually returns with a symbolic object or with new wisdom or magic. This symbolizes that new life comes from death. In this case, the tapster gives the drinkard a symbol of new life in the form of an egg, which can grant wishes. The egg is a common symbol of resurrection and rebirth, which is familiar to Western readers in the form of the Easter egg.



Pages 285-293

Pages 285-293 Summary

After the giant carries the drinkard and his wife in the sack all night, he unloads his bag on the ground. There are nine other creatures in the bag, and once he can finally see them, the drinkard is terrified of these monsters. They are all so horrible that he can hardly look at them. The giant has a farm, and he tells all of his captives to get to work farming the field. Then he leaves them to work. The drinkard gets in an argument with one of the creatures and kills it. The next creature steps up to fight, and the drinkard kills that one, too. He kills all of them but the last one, who knocks him unconscious. The last creature gets up and goes to tell the giant what has happened, and the drinkard's wife quickly revives her husband, and they run away.

The couple returns to the road they were on, but it is still occupied by the army of dead babies. They decide that they will have to travel in the bush but close to the road so they can find their way. After about two weeks, they begin to see some familiar plant life, so the drinkard can prepare new juju from the plants. This is good, because he ran out of juju a long time ago and has been helpless to protect himself and his wife.

The drinkard and his wife meet a creature that keeps crying "hungry-hungry-hungry." They feel bad for the Hungry-creature, so they give it some bananas, the only food they have. It is not satisfied but keeps following them begging for food. They go through their packs, looking for some crumb of food they can give it, and the Hungry-creature sees the egg from the Deads' Town. The drinkard wants to protect the egg from being eaten, so he quickly transforms his wife, her pack, all their possessions, and the egg into a wooden doll. The drinkard puts the doll into his pocket, but the Hungry-creature is very curious about it and keeps wanting to look at the doll. Finally he gobbles up the doll. The drinkard quickly sees the bad situation he is now in, since the Hungry-creature has just eaten his weapons, egg, and ammunition.

The drinkard allows the Hungry-creature to eat him as well. Inside the animal's belly, the drinkard changes the doll back into his wife and possessions. Then he uses his cutlass to cut the beast open from the inside, and the two escape.

Soon the drinkard and his wife come to a "mixed town," which they enter. The wife is sick, so the drinkard takes her to a doctor until she is better. While he is there, the townspeople ask him to work as a judge for them. He agrees, and they bring him a multiple-suicide case to decide. The first man is determined to never pay a single debt, so when the time comes to pay it, he kills himself instead. The second man is determined to always collect debts, so when his debtor commits suicide, the debt-collector also kills himself. A bystander wants to see the outcome of the fight, so he kills himself, too, just to follow the other two men. Who is guilty for these deaths? The drinkard can not decide, so he adjourns court for a year.



The drinkard has a second court case, which is a dispute between the three wives of one man. One day, this man falls down dead. His first wife shows her devotion by dying with him. The second wife remembers that there is a wizard nearby who can raise the dead, so she runs and gets the wizard. The third wife watches over the bodies. The wizard raises the man and his first wife, and asks that he receive one wife in payment. No one can decide which wife should go to the wizard, since each has demonstrated her love for the husband. The drinkard again adjourns court for a year, to avoid making a decision. Then he and his wife go on their way.

Pages 285-293 Analysis

There are many references to insatiable hunger and unquenchable thirst. The drinkard himself can drink to great excess. The drinkard's son, whom he kills, has an appetite that is never satisfied, and when he comes back from the dead, his appetite is even bigger. The Hungry-creature is yet another example of this, though this one seems to actually be the personification of hunger.

After all the fantastical details, it is jarring to have the drinkard casually refer to details as though they take place in the real world. Even though both court cases involve supernatural events, the drinkard still feels bad about abandoning the cases, and appeals to his readers to help him with them. "So I shall be very much grateful if anyone who reads this story-book can judge one or both cases and send the judgment to me as early as possible, because the whole people in the "mixed town" want me very urgently to come and judge the two cases." (Chapter 30, p. 293)



Pages 293-302

Pages 293-302 Summary

The drinkard and his wife finally make it back to his hometown. He has been gone so long that everyone is overjoyed to see him, and meet his wife. Unfortunately, there has been a terrible famine in the land. Heaven and Land have had an argument, so Heaven has decided not to rain again on Land. Thus, there is no food anywhere. The drinkard gets out the egg he got from his tapster, and puts it in a bowl of water. Huge quantities of food come out of the egg.

People start coming from miles around to receive food. They take all that is left over back to their own towns. Because the famine is so widespread, people come from far and wide to get food, so that the drinkard can barely open the door to his house. He brings the egg outside, so it can feed people faster. The people get very unruly and break the egg. Now it will not produce anything. The drinkard glues the egg back together, but this time only whips come out, and whip all the people until they run away.

The drinkard finds out the cause of the famine. He sends a volunteer to bring a sacrifice up to Heaven. Heaven, thinking that Land has sent the sacrifice, begins to rain. Soon the land produces fruit.

Pages 293-302 Analysis

After all the fantastical monsters the drinkard has fought, he comes home to a real monster. Real-life famine is far worse than any of the weird monsters that the drinkard has encountered. The famine has turned even good people into monsters who eat their own children.

The drinkard sums up his journey as though it is a small thing and as though the egg itself is nothing special. "And so all our trials, difficulties and many years' travel brought only an egg or resulted in an egg." (Chapter 32, p. 295) This is rather profound, since an egg represents all the potential of the future, much like the magic seeds from Wraith-Island. The drinkard has come back to the beginning again, literally and figuratively.



Characters

The Palm-Wine Drinkard

The Palm-Wine Drinkard's real name is "Father of gods who could do anything in this world." He is the oldest of eight children, and the son of the richest man in a town in Nigeria. Because he loves drinking palm-wine so much from early childhood, his father gives him a palm tree farm and assigns him the job of drinking palm-wine. This is his only job, and he can drink palm-wine in heroic quantities, often consuming 50 or 100 kegs in a sitting. The drinkard has powerful magic, or juju, which he often uses to transform himself or his wife into an animal or object. He is very brave, facing the dangerous, unknown bush, fighting beasts and monsters and spirits. The drinkard often acts as a trickster, sneaking around hidden in animal form, so he can overhear his enemies' plans. Although the drinkard is considered a good man and is judged righteous by Faithful-Mother, he kills a lot of the scary things he encounters in the jungle, including his own son, whom he kills twice. The drinkard is powerful enough to travel to the city of the dead to get back his tapster so he can get back to the serious business of binge drinking every day. Although he describes himself as a god, he can not produce his juju alone but must gather plants in the jungle and make the juju out of them.

The Drinkard's Wife

The drinkard meets his wife when he goes to rescue her at the request of her father. She is very beautiful, like an angel, and many of the men in that town want to marry her. She is too independent to marry, but one day she sees a beautiful man in the market, and follows him home. When the drinkard rescues her from captivity by the Skulls, he decides to marry her, and she goes with him on the rest of his travels. Although the wife is an important character, she never has a name, being only referred to as "this lady" or "my wife." The wife is a hardy, brave woman, going through endless tortures with her husband. Many times, she is unexpectedly turned into an inanimate object by the drinkard. Nonetheless, she goes with her husband unquestioningly, always moving on after settling in yet another town, going to face monsters and seek out the spirits of the dead. The wife does not give birth in the normal way, but instead her thumb swells up one day. When she pricks it on a thorn, the thumb bursts and produces a half-grown boy. The wife and husband are soon afraid of their son, and eventually kill him, since he turns out to be a sort of monster himself. The wife apparently feels no motherly grief at the slaying of her son but just wants to get away from him, to safety.

Faithful-Mother

Faithful-Mother is a spirit who lives in the White Tree. She watches over travelers and keeps the good people safe.



Death

Death is the personification of death. The drinkard tricks him and catches him in a net, so Death must roam the world and never return home.

The Tapster

The tapster has the job of tapping palm-wine from palm trees, and no one can do it like he can. When he dies, the drinkard goes to the Deads' Town to find him.

ZURRJIR

ZURRJIR is the drinkard's son, miraculously born out of his mother's thumb. He is a sort of monster, and his parents kill him several times.

The Hungry-Monster

The Hungry-Monster is a monster that is always saying "Hungry-hungry-hungry" who could eat all the food in the world and still be hungry.

The Drinkard's Father-in-Law

The wife's father tells the drinkard where to find the tapster but only when the drinkard has brought back the man's daughter.

The Drinkard's Father

The drinkard's father is the richest man in town and has eight children.

Drum

"Drum" is the personification of drumming and is the best drummer ever.

Song

"Song" is the personification of singing and has the best song ever.

Dance

"Dance" is the personification of dancing and turns out to be the Red-Lady in disguise. Whenever people are around "Drum," "Song," and "Dance," they can not help dancing around and singing for days on end.



Objects/Places

The White Tree

The white tree has a city inside of it. It is the domain of Faithful-Mother and Faithful-Hands.

The drinkard's hometown

The drinkard comes from a nice city in Nigeria, and his father is the richest man in town.

The Palm-Tree Farm

The palm-tree farm is nine miles square. The drinkard's father gives it to him so the drinkard can have all the wine he wants.

Wraith-Island

Wraith-Island is an island in a swamp in the jungle. The magic seeds from that island bloom instantly when planted.

Unreturnable-Heaven's Town

There are only dead people living in this town, who do anything they can to torture any mortals who come their way.

Deads' Town

The tapster goes to Deads' Town after dying, but the drinkard can not enter the town because he is still alive. He sets up a shack outside.

The Egg

The tapster gives the drinkard a magic egg which can grant as many wishes as he wants, if the drinkard puts the egg in water.

The Skulls' House

The family of Skulls keeps the drinkard's wife captive in their house, which is a hole in the ground.



The Wooden-Doll

The drinkard sometimes changes his wife into a wooden-doll to protect her.

The Mixed Town

After leaving the Deads' Town, the drinkard settles for a while in a "mixed" town, where he works as a judge.



Themes

Death Is Not the End

"The Palm-Wine Drinkard" uses mythology and symbolism to explore various aspects of death. One definite theme is that death is not an end but a transition. The drinkard faces death many times and in many ways but lives through the experiences. In fact, early in the story he pays Death himself a visit and tricks Death into falling into a net, so that Death can not go back home again. "So since that day that I had brought Death out from his house, he has no permanent place to dwell or stay, and we are hearing his name about in the world." (Chapter 1, p. 199)

When the drinkard and his wife have their horrible baby, they decide to kill it by burning down the building where their son is. This death is not permanent, and when the wife insists on going back for her gold jewelry, their son comes back as a talking baby, rising up out of the ashes. This child has apparently been born with a sort of immortality, but his parents gain their immortality through commerce. Having fallen on hard times in their travels, the couple sells their "death" and lends out their "fear." Later, when encountering monsters, the drinkard can still be afraid of them, but he can not die. ". . . when I saw this red-fish, I was greatly terrified and I was soon faint, but I remembered that we had sold our "death" and I could not die again, so I did not care about it again, but I feared it greatly because we did not sell our "fear." " (Chapter 21, p. 259)

The World Is a Dangerous Place

Considering the political climate, it should not be surprising that a book straight out of Africa sees the world as a dangerous place, filled with known obstacles and unknown terrors. Some of the towns populated by "alives" are not so scary, until the people are turned into cannibals by a famine. The bush, which is the area surrounding all the towns, is a terrifying place, hard to penetrate and filled with real animals and mythological monstrosities. One of the many monsters the couple finds is described as follows: "His fingernails were long to about two feet, his head was bigger than his body ten times. He had a large mouth which was full of long teeth, these teeth were about one foot long and as thick as a cow's horns . . . There were five horns on his head . . ." (Chapter 16, p. 229) The description continues in this vein, going on to offer more horrible details. This is just one of many monsters, each with their own bizarre description.

Further into the territory of the "deads" and the spirits, the towns themselves are far more dangerous than the bush, especially "Unreturnable-Heaven's Town." The inhabitants of this town love to hurt humans in any way they can, and as soon as the drinkard and his wife enter the town, the people hold them down and beat and stone them. Close to Deads' Town, even babies become terrifying. "We met about 400 dead babies on that road who were singing the song of mourning and marching to Deads'



Town . . . all of them had sticks in their hands . . . they started to beat us with the sticks in their hands . . ." (Chapter 25, p. 280) Then again, large numbers of dead babies are a very scary thing in real life, not because they are creepy, but because infant mortality is a confusing, sad reality. The world is such a dangerous place that many people do not make it through their first year, especially in Africa where this book is set.

Transformations

There are all kinds of unexpected transformations in "The Palm-Wine Drinkard." The first notable transformation is that of the Complete Gentleman, who loses his body parts little by little, changing from the most beautiful man alive into a grotesque Skull. The drinkard often uses transmogrification to trick someone, changing himself into a bird or lizard, or changing his wife into a little doll. When he first meets the lady who is to become his wife, he changes her into a kitten, and puts the kitten in his pocket. Then the drinkard turns himself into a sparrow and flies away, with the lady still in his pocket. Another time, he turns himself into a pebble but finds he has trouble moving where he would like to go in pebble form and can only fall down a mountain. When the drinkard and his wife have a miraculous son, they are worried about the implications of the name the child gives himself. "He said that his name was "ZURRJIR" which means a son who would change himself into another thing very soon." (Chapter 11, p. 214) Even heaven and earth have undergone transformations. The drinkard reveals that long ago, Heaven and Land were humans and close friends before their argument. Just as they have been transformed from their human form, so also the land is transformed from a famished wasteland into a good place.



Style

Point of View

The point of view is first-person, from the viewpoint of the Palm-Wine Drinkard, who is telling the story. The drinkard, whose name is "Father of gods who could do everything in this world," begins his tale by informing the reader that he has been a palm-wine drinkard since the age of ten. The drinkard knows a great deal of magic and juju, and he knows a lot about the jungle. Nonetheless, there is a lot he does not know about the deep jungle, and it contains many surprises. Some of these creatures are so fantastical, the drinkard simply says that he can not describe them. Sometimes he admits that he has no idea what a creature looks like, because he fought it at night with no light. This adds a realistic hint to a story that is otherwise fantastical. As for the drinkard's knowledge of the world outside Africa, he appears to have had very little contact with the Western world. Although there are certainly references to Christianity and modern technology, like telephones, it is unclear how sheltered the drinkard is. Above all, it is an African point of view.

Setting

The setting is in Nigeria in the early twentieth century. Most of the land in the story consists of deep, thick jungle, called the "bush," with towns scattered through most of it, many miles apart. Some of these towns seem like they could have a grounding in reality, like the first few towns encountered. The drinkard's hometown, and the first two towns he encounters on his journey, are populated with "alives" and human-beings. Later, as the drinkard and his wife travel farther into the bush, they find many islands and towns filled with "deads" and spirits, as well as supernatural monsters. They even go as far as the "Deads' Town," but are not allowed inside because they are still alive. The story takes place in a world filled not only with spirits but with humans and plants capable of great magic. Some places defy the laws of reality, like the White Tree, which is the size of an ordinary tree on the outside, but contains an entire city. Later in the story, the whole land is dry and barren with a famine. The famine was caused by an argument between Land and Heaven, so Heaven is withholding rain from Land.

Language and Meaning

The writing style of Amos Tutuola defies description; it has to be experienced to be understood. That being said, it is obvious that he does not speak traditional English. In fact, this book is written in a sort of "New English," which is commonly spoken in Tutuola's area. The sentence structure is haphazard, tending toward incredibly long sentences. The grammar and punctuation are equally random. Tutuola uses very unusual phrases, so that sometimes his meaning is a very unexpected image; whereas sometimes, any sense of meaning is just lost. This book is based on the Yoruba



tradition of storytelling, which involves a speaker "performing" a story for an audience that participates in the telling. Unfortunately, the exotic, conversational style of the storyteller comes across poorly in print. The story sounds all right if the reader can imagine an old Nigerian person excitedly telling it to children around a fire, trying to scare them into being good. The repetitions and casual mistakes can easily be attributed to a narrator who is half distracted by watching the children. If the reader forgets to imagine this, the story reads like something written by a child, or by someone who learned limited English by reading a textbook. It almost needs a translation.

Structure

Tutuola's storytelling style is ambling and haphazard. "The Palm-Wine Drinkard" is divided apparently randomly into sections. Some episodes are split into many short sections with their own titles, often repeating events in more than one section. In other sections, several separate events are crammed into one large section. In fact, there can even be stories that share a section with another story, yet are divided into sections mentioning details.

At the very beginning, the story introduces itself as a sort of ghost story, by introducing the drinkard, and starting him on his quest to find his dead tapster. By page 203, things start to get really weird. The story contains far more wild creatures than Grimm's Fairy Tales or Tolkien, and they are encountered one after another. Often the drinkard and his wife are taken captive, but by page 274 they finally make it to Deads' Town. On page 280, they start back on the hazardous road home, and by page 295, they make it back to the drinkard's hometown to his father's house. The rest of the book deals with the famine in that land, and how the drinkard eventually ends it.



Quotes

"I had no other work more than to drink palm-wine in my life." (Chapter 1, p. 191)

"When there was no palm-wine for me to drink I started to drink ordinary water which I was unable to taste before, but I did not satisfy with it as palm-wine." (Chapter 1, p. 193)

"This old man was not really a man, he was a god and he was eating with his wife when I reached there . . . I myself was a god and juju-man." (Chapter 1, p. 194)

"By and by, this lady followed the Skull to his house, and the house was a hole in the ground." (Chapter 5, p. 205)

"So, I saved the lady from the complete gentleman in the market who afterwards reduced to a "Skull" and the lady became my wife since that day. This is how I got a wife." (Chapter 11, p. 213)

". . . his belly swelled out like a very large tube, because he had eaten too much food and yet he did not satisfy at any time for he could eat the whole food in this world without satisfaction." (Chapter 12, p. 219)

". . . God was so good, we began to snuff the sweet smelling and we were very satisfied with it and we did not feel hungry again." (Chapter 17, p. 233)

"These birds were eating the flesh of the animals; the birds were about 2 feet long and their beaks were also one foot and very sharp as a sword." (Chapter 17, p. 234)

"When these birds started to eat the flesh of those animals, within a second there we saw about 50 holes on the bodies of those animals and within a second the animals fell down and died." (Chapter 17, p. 235)

"They wrapped themselves with a kind of leaves as their clothes, but had costly clothes for their domestic animals, and cut their domestic animals' finger nails, but kept their own uncut for one hundred years;" (Chapter 18, p. 240)

"Unreturnable-Heaven's town: He said:—a town in which are only enemies of God living, only cruel, greedy, and merciless creatures." (Chapter 18, p. 241)



"This is not a human-being and she is not a spirit, but what is she?" (Chapter 20, p. 253)

"Then he asked whether we were still alive or dead before coming there. We told him that we were still alive and we were not dead." (Chapter 21, p. 254)

"So we are very glad that both of you came to the Red-town just now because there remain only three days before these two creatures come out for their sacrifice of this year and I should be very glad too if one of you would volunteer his or her life for these two creatures." (Chapter 21, p. 257)

"Early in the morning, the king told the attendants to wash and dress us with the finest clothes and put us on horse and they (attendants) must take us around the town for seven days which meant to enjoy our last life in the world for that 7 days, after that he (king) should kill us as we killed his son." (Chapter 24, p. 272)

"As we were very hungry before reaching there, we ate the food to excess and when I tasted the palm-wine, I could not take my mouth away until I drank the whole ten kegs." (Chapter 25, p. 276)

". . . I performed one of my jujus and it changed my wife and our loads into a wooden-doll and I put it in my pocket." (Chapter 29, p. 286)

Topics for Discussion

How does the palm-wine drinkard compare with American folk heroes like Paul Bunyan or Superman?

What is the role of binge drinking in the story? Do you think this is acceptable? How does this compare with typical stories about a long, arduous journey to get alcohol?

The drinkard meets many monsters in the jungle. Are any of the monsters symbolic? What do they represent?

What does this story tell you about the Yoruba attitude toward death?

Why are the inhabitants of Unreturnable-Heaven's Town so cruel? How is the name of the town ironic?

What are some Western or Christian references in the story?

Are there any parts of the book that seem totally incomprehensible? If so, is this because they are from another culture, or because the events are so bizarre?