The Raft Study Guide

The Raft by John Pepper Clark

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Introduction

The Raft is the third play in a trilogy by John Pepper Clark. With the other *plays-Song of a Goat (1961)* and *The Masquerade-the* trilogy was published under the title *Three Plays* by Oxford University Press in 1964. Clark wrote both *The Masquerade* and *The Raft* in the United States while on a fellowship to Princeton University from 1962 to 1963, one of the few positive outcomes of the experience *The Raft* is often regarded by critics as the least solid of the plays in the trilogy, and they have given it mixed reviews. It is not often performed because of the difficulties in staging the play. The first production was in 1964 at the University of Ibadan (Nigeria) Arts Theatre.

The Raft focuses on four lumbermen who face numerous problems after the raft they are on is set adrift in unusual circumstances. Despite the fact that some of the men have experience in dealing with the river, they do not reach their destination.

The Raft is set on the Niger River Delta, where Clark grew up and where he set many of his plays. Critics have offered varied interpretations of the play. Some believe it is an allegory of the political situation in Nigeria at the time, while others argue it is about economic determinism. Still others, including Clark, say *The Raft* concerns the human condition and the precarious world in which all of humankind lives.

Author Biography

Clark, also known as Johnson Pepper Clark Bekederemo, was born on April 6, 1935, in Kiagbodo, Nigeria. He is the son of Clark Fuludu Bekederemo, an Ijaw tribal leader, and his wife, Poro. Clark received his elementary education at three different primary schools in the 1940s. He went on to a government college, Ughelli, and earned his Cambridge School Certificate in 1954. After working for a year as a government clerk, Clark entered the University of Ibadan.

During his time at the university, Clark began participating in literary activities. He founded *The Horn.* a poetry journal, and wrote poetry himself. He published his first volume, *Poems,* in 1962. Clark also wrote his first play, *Song of a Goal,* which was produced at the university in 196]. Clark earned his B.A. with honors in 1960.

After graduation, Clark primarily made his living by working with, and for, the media. He spent a year as an information officer for the Nigerian government. Then in 1961, Clark spent a year writing and editing for a newspaper, the *Daily Express,* in Lagos. Nigeria. Clark's work on the newspaper led to a prestigious fellowship to Princeton University in the United States from 1963-64. Clark had negative experiences there, which were chronicled in his memoir, *America, Their America.* Though he was forced to leave the fellowship early, his time in the United States proved fruitful. Clark wrote *The Masquerade* and *The Raft,* which when combined with *Song of a Goal,* formed a trilogy, which was published in 1964.

When Clark returned to Nigeria, he held several fellowships, including one at the University of Lagos. In 1966, he wrote another play, *Ozidi,* even though for the next two decades he primarily concentrated on writing poetry and nonfiction scholarly work related to his job. Clark was hired by the University of Lagos as a professor in 1966 and was promoted to the chair of the English Department in 1970. He retired in the early 1980s.

Clark returned to the theater when he left teaching. With his actress wife, Ebun (with whom he had three children), he founded the PEC Repertory Theatre in 1982 in Lagos. In addition to running the theater, Clark continued to write plays, including another trilogy about the history of the Niger Delta. The Bikoroa Plays and poetry, including 1985's "State of the Union." Though Clark was ultimately more critically acclaimed for his poetry than his plays, he continued to do both for many years, splitting his time between his native city and Lagos.

Plot Summary

One: Tide-Wash

The Raft opens at night on a creek in the Niger Delta. Two lumbermen, Kengide and Olotu, are trying to sleep in a cabin on a raft. Lumber is attached to the raft; the men and their two compatriots are to transport it down the Niger River for pay. Their slumber is interrupted by Ogro, who is pacing outside the cabin and muttering to himself. Kengide and Olotu become angry with him and each other. The fourth man appears, Ibobo. He accuses Ogro of walking in his sleep again. Ogro denies he is asleep, Ibobo reminds him that they lost a boat recently because he was asleep. Ogro changes the subject, because the raft is adrift. The men check the moorings and all are loose. They wake Kengide and Olotu. All the lumbermen believe they tied the knots tightly and cannot understand how all seven of the moorings came loose at once. They try to figure out what happened, concluding sea cows must have eaten the roots of the reeds the raft was tied to.

As the raft drifts, the men attempt to discern where they are going. They argue over the merits of turning up the lamp to see their location. Kengide and Olotu continue to bicker with each other, making personal insults. Because of the tide, they believe they are either going out to sea or in the direction of Odi, if the raft got turned around. Olotu's watch reads just past 5 a.in., but Kengide does not believe it is necessarily accurate. He accuses him of owning an unreliable watch. The men argue more. Olotu insults everyone because he is worried about the fate of the raft and no one else seems to be, in his opinion. Ogro says he has the most to lose, for when the raft arrives, he will be married to the chief s fairest daughter. Olotu panics when Kengide informs them that they are in the Osikoboro whirlpool. Olotu tries to punt them out of the mess with a bamboo pole, but none of the rest help him, believing he will only make it worse.

Two: Wind-Lash

It is now late morning. The men clean up from their meal, still stuck in the whirlpool. Ogro thanks Kengide for making the soup, but Kengide reminds them it could be their last meal. They argue over what happened to the last of their food. Kengide accuses rats of eating what was left, while the others accuse each other, especially Ibobo, of waste. Ogro reminds them that they are still stuck in the whirlpool. Kengide has a plan to get them back on track. Ogro is more concerned with food. He decides to catch fish with a can. When Ogro goes inside the cabin to fetch the can, the others make fun of his belief that he will marry a chief s daughter without any money of his own. When Ogro returns, he annoys Kengide. Ogro proposes to fish using excrement as bait, something the other men find provincial. Kengide tells an unusual fishing story from his childhood in which a mend caught a chicken.

Kengide encourages them to wait for the tide. When Olotu tells them that it is one o'clock, Ogro becomes angry because the tide should be there by now. Swallows swarm the area, indicating a storm is coming. The men argue over whether their mats should be rolled up and stored. Olotu decides to make a mast of the post where the lamp hangs. The others, save Kengide, help him put up a sail made of the mats. In the storm, the raft breaks in two Olotu is alone on the half with the sail. Olotu tries to make it back to the main part of the raft to be with the others, but he cannot swim. Kengide will not allow Ogro to swim to him with a towrope because there are too many sharks around. Olotu is swept out of sight.

Three: Iron and Fire

It is now late in the afternoon. Ogro is singing and playing an instrument There is dissension among the men related to their backgrounds Ogro's song is about death, a theme Kengide finds distasteful. Kengide's expressed displeasure angers Ogro so much that he moves to the other end of the raft. Ibobo chides Kengide for his attitude and what happened earlier. They speculate on what happened to Olotu. Ogro calls them over. He believes there is a ship coming up behind them Kengide does not believe it. Ogro insists that it is a Niger Company boat because he knows all the boats in the area. Kengide finally believes him and makes plans to move the raft out of the way Ogro tries to get the captain of the ship to slow down but does not succeed. The ship passes, and Ogro jumps into the water to swim to the ship. Men on the ship stone Ogro with coal and iron when he reaches the ship's flank. He does not drown, but he gets caught in the propellers and dies.

Four: Call of the Land

It is late in the day, and the raft is heading for port. Ibobo again becomes angry at Kengide's lack of sensitivity, especially concerning the loss of the other two lumbermen. Ibobo accuses him of being sadistic, in particular where the loss of Ogro is concerned Kengide admits he is only concerned with making money. Ibobo continues to mourn the loss of both men and wishes Ogro was there to help as they near the point where they need to face the tide. Kengide believes Ogro was an idiot and expresses cynical opinions about the world.

Ibobo nearly goes crazy from anger, and Kengide takes the oar from him. Ibobo believes that he sees lights nearby, but Kengide cannot see anything as it is getting darker. Kengide starts to believe he sees lights as Ibobo grows crazier. They talk about what they will do when they get to port. Kengide consults Ibobo on whether they should pull the raft ashore for the night. Ibobo wants them to go on so he can sleep in a real bed that night. They keep going. Kengide continues to tease him, then expresses his opinion on the different kinds of women in the world. He reveals a bit about his past. Ibobo expresses a desire to marry. All of a sudden, they are engulfed by fog and cannot even see each other. They lose their direction. Kengide takes Ibobo's hand so they know where the other is. Ibobo believes they are passing by their port city of Burutu.

Ibobo wants to jump and swim to shore, but Kengide will not let him and holds tighter. They scream as they disappear over the waters.

Summary

The Raft is John Pepper Clark's one act play about four lumbermen adrift on a raft on the Niger River. The interpersonal dynamics among the four men, Olutu, Kengide, Ogro and Ibobo, mask the fear and uncertainty they share about their perilous journey.

As the play begins, it is nighttime on a creek on a delta of the Niger River. Four men lie adrift on a raft, bearing lumber down river for a businessman. Kengide and Olutu are frustrated, because Ogro is making too much noise for them to sleep. As Ogro continues to pace and grunt, the fourth man, Ibobo, appears and chastises Olutu for sleepwalking again. The group lost their boat recently, because Olutu was sleepwalking or not paying attention during his watch.

Ogro tires of this line of conversation and tells Ibobo that the raft is adrift. After checking the moorings, their fears are confirmed. Olulu and Kengide are awakened, and all men claim to have tied their respective knots firmly. The men rule out the possibility that a local fisherman had cut them loose, because none of their belongings has been taken. The most logical explanation is that of sea cows biting through the reeds that had tethered the raft.

The men try to guess the direction in which they are now headed and conclude that they are either drifting out to sea or back in the direction from which they came. The fear and frustration of the situation makes the men bicker over even the smallest things, such as whether or not Olutu's watch tells accurate time.

As the captain of the ill-fated ship, Olutu feels a responsibility to get the logs delivered safely. He accuses the other men of not sharing his level of commitment. Ogro contends that that is not true, because he has been promised the loveliest daughter of the chief back home.

After drifting all night, the men are drenched in the sunlight of late morning, but still cannot determine their location. The men have just finished eating a meal. While they clean up, they bicker again and accuse each other of wasting food, the supply of which is now at an end.

Ogro fears starving and attempts to catch a fish using a can as a net. The others deride Ogro for his primitive beliefs and for thinking that he will be allowed to marry one of the chief's daughters, when he clearly has nothing to provide for her.

The men grow anxious over how to get out of their predicament, but Kengide, who is the oldest of the four, advises that they should just wait for the tide that will raise the raft and allow it to move freely once more.

Soon, the men see flocks of swallows moving into the area, which means that a rainstorm is approaching. Ibobo and Olutu begin to roll up their mats so that the rain will not soak them, but Ogro suggests that the mats be strung together and used as sails to

take advantage of the rising wind. Kengide agrees with Ogro, and the men complete the task. Soon, the little raft is moving again.

Suddenly, a huge crack announces a break in the raft, leaving Olutu alone on the severed piece with the sail. Unfortunately, Olutu cannot swim and cries out to the others. They want to help him, but are afraid of the sharks swarming in the area. Olutu's piece of the raft continues to wash out to sea. All that is left of Olutu is his voice crying out for help.

By late afternoon, the raft continues to drift. Ogro sings, accompanied by an instrument. This is much to the dismay of Ibobo and Kengide, who do not like the dire theme of death in the song. Eventually, Ogro moves to another part of the raft, and Ibobo and Kengide wonder what has happened to Olutu. Kengide tries to console Ibobo by telling him that he is sure that Olutu was rescued by a fishing boat and is resting comfortably.

Ogro's singing has given way to his calling out that he sees a Niger Company ship coming up on their rear. The other two men agree and begin to row quickly, so the raft will not be caught up in the ship's tow and be drowned. Ogro believes that he can get the attention of the ship's captain and begins to wave his shirt, but to no avail.

Kengide is frustrated at Ogro's behavior and tells him to row with him and Ibobo. However, Ogro, caught up in boyhood memories of swimming out to boats for play, swims toward the fast moving ship. Instead of being helped overboard, Ogro is pelted with chunks of coal and his grasping hands beaten with iron rods until he slips back into the water and is mangled in the ship's engine.

It is almost nighttime now, and Ibobo and Kengide are the only two remaining men from an original crew of seven that left on the journey. Kengide shows no sympathy for the lost men, who made poor choices and probably paid with their lives. Ibobo does not understand Kengide's lack of feeling for what has happened to his fellow crewmates.

Kengide reveals that his only interest in this trip is the money promised him by the logging company. Kengide's cynicism about life comes from many years of working for other men and barely being able to make a living.

Ibobo is still feeling the loss of Olutu and Ogro, but Kengide is realistic about death as a part of life. Ibobo feels the effects of the stress of the day, and Kengide offers to take over the steering till so that Ibobo may rest.

Suddenly, Ibobo sees the lights of the port city. His spirits lift, in spite of the fact that Kengide cannot see any lights in the direction Ibobo mentions. The two men begin to discuss what they will do when they reach the port, and Ibobo is anxious to meet up with a woman. Ibobo dreams of sleeping in a real bed with a female companion, and Kengide reels off stories that he has heard about homosexual encounters, as well as women with whom he has had relationships during his life. Ibobo is anxious to return home and find a nice girl to marry through an arrangement made by his mother.

In anticipation of their reaching the port, Ibobo has been preening in a mirror. Now, he cannot see his image and soon cannot see Kengide near him, due to an extremely dense fog. The two men begin to panic, because they can no longer see the shoreline but can hear the horns and noises of the port.

Ibobo declares that he will swim ashore, but Kengide grabs Ibobo's hand and will not allow him to jump into the water. The fog is too dense to see, and there is nothing to provide any sense of direction. Ibobo's fear rushes out of him in a scream. Soon, Kengide joins his screaming, as they hold onto each other and continue to drift.

Analysis

The setting of the play is on a raft on the Niger River in Nigeria, in the area between the mouth of the river and the port city of Burutu. The play was written in the early 1960's, but the author does not define the time period, which means that the drama could occur at any time.

The plot line is a simple one, in that four men are left from a crew of seven hired to carry a shipment of logs down river to a port city. Three of the men were apparently lost, when the four men on the raft became separated from the ship. The activity in the play is not as important as the dialogue and interactions between the men, as the author wants to point out the universal human dynamic when confronted with extreme conflict.

Part of the conflict for the men is the lack of control they suffer in their current circumstance. The author uses the raft as a symbol for the periods in the lives of all people, when events carry them forward with no warning and no opportunity to change a course of direction. The personalities of the characters become even more important, because they are stressed, and their independent actions emerge with dire consequences.

Olutu's separation from the others is unfortunate, and his fate is not positive. Ogro's decision to swim to the ship is his undoing, but at least he takes some sort of action. Kengide tries to protect the remaining crewmember, Ibobo, and ultimately becomes his comfort as the two men most certainly glide off to their deaths in the fog. The author uses these situations to display the stages of a man's life, aggression through sage counselor, and imparts the message that each man must ride his raft on the river of life and act according to his level of experience.

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Characters

Ibobo

Ibobo is one of the lumbermen on the raft He has some useful knowledge about the water and the situation they are in; for example, he figures out that sea cows must have chewed through the moorings and set the raft adrift. Ibobo has a rather terse relationship with his raft mates. He is critical of Kengide and Olotu's bickering and of Ogro's singing, especially the negative themes of his songs. Ibobo also believes it is a fantasy that Ogro will marry the old chief's finest daughter, If any daughter at all Yet when Olotu drifts away on a separated part of the raft at the end of scene 2, Ibobo tries to help by yelling advice to him.

After Olotu and Ogro are gone, Ibobo becomes Kengide's primary sparring partner. Ibobo is angry with him for letting O1otu go, and he misses Ogro's river sensibilities. Despite their adversarial relationship, there are moments of closeness between Kengide and Ibobo. Though, at the end of the play, Kengide asks Ibobo if he wants to pull up on the shore for the night; Ibobo says no. His only desire is to sleep In a warm bed, perhaps with a woman, something Kengide can understand When the fog envelops them, Kengide prevents Ibobo from jumping off on his own to try to swim to Burutu in order to save himself Instead, they die together.

Kengide

Kengide is the leader of the men on the raft. Kengide is from river people and is very familiar with tides and currents. He formulates the plans to get them out of the situation, and the other three are forced to trust him, though sometimes they do so reluctantly. He does not get along with the other men. His first primary sparring partner is Olotu.

Ibobo replaces Olotu after his disappearance. Kengide does not hesitate to express his opinions on everything, but he is intolerant of the others' beliefs. Still, when the raft first starts to drift, Kengide is the man they turn to for guidance on how to get out of their situation. The other three lumbermen generally follow his lead in the crises, but when they do not and something bad happens (as in when both Ogro and Olotu are separated from the others), Kengide voices his negative opinion of them. He also will not allow the others to save the man in jeopardy. Despite his vast knowledge (or perhaps because of it), Kengide is very negative about the situation they are in. As the unexpected fog comes in and they face death, Kengide will not allow Ibobo to jump off near the port and save himself. Kengide is afraid to be alone, and the men die together.

Ogro

Ogro is one of the Okrika people. He comes from a hometown that is located on the water. Kengide is often critical of Ogro. In turn, Ogro tries to intercede between Olotu

and Kengide on occasion. The others on the raft see Ogro as rather negative, yet he has some knowledge of the water and related crafts. Ogro worries about the situations the lumbermen are in and tries to come up with solutions. It is Ogro who is the first to realize that they are adrift and helps to figure out why they went adrift in the first place. At the end of scene 2, it is he who comes up with the idea of stringing the mats together to make a sail and get them out of the storm When Olotu becomes separated from them, Ogro wants to swim out to save him but Kengide will not let him. Ogro believes that after the delivery of the lumber is made, he will marry because the old chief has promised him his fairest daughter. Others believe that this will not happen, and they are proven correct. At the end of scene 3, Ogro becomes the second to leave the raft. After a ship passes them by, he decides to swim to it to be saved. A strong swimmer, he reaches the ship, but the people aboard throw coal and iron at him stunning him. Ogro dies when he gets caught in the ship's propellers.

Ogrope

See Ogro

Olotu

Olotu is one of the more optimistic characters. He is a townsman (that is, from a township) and has traveled. While Olotu tries to be the voice of reason, he also constantly bickers with the others, especially Kengide. Kengide does not trust O1otu's judgment because of his background. For his part, O1otu is most critical of Ogro. In scene 1, Olotu becomes frustrated by the others' lack of focus on the raft and what is happening to them He wants things explained to him. Yet, even when they initially get caught in whirlpool at the end of scene 1, he believes they will be free. Olotu tries to get the others to row out at the end of scene 1 (though no one will) and helps Ogro build a sail and mast in the storm at the end of scene 2. Despite these actions, Olotu is the first to exit the play. He faces an uncertain fate after the part of the raft he is on breaks off and floats away. Though Olotu wants to be with the other men and the number that will pay him money, he cannot swim, and Kengide will not allow Ogro to swim to him to tie a towline to the loose portion of the raft. After he floats away, the other characters speculate on what happened to him, but no one knows for sure.

Themes

Fate, Chance, and Circumstance

The related themes of fate, chance, and circumstance all play significant roles in *The Raft.* Many of the events of in the play happen for no controllable reason on the characters' part. This is true of the event that starts the play: that is, the raft being set adrift. Though all four men tied the moorings of the raft tightly, the best the raft mates can conclude is that sea cows probably gnawed on the moorings and cut the raft loose. But no one is exactly sure what happened. Throughout the play, such random occurrences pile up. Fate takes the raft into a whirlpool, a storm, and fog. All four men escape the whirlpool. During the storm, Olotu helps Ogro and Ibobo build a sail to help take them out of the storm at the end of scene 2. Instead, by chance, the raft is split in half, and Olotu drifts away on the part with the sail. By the time they are in the fog at the end of the play, only Ibobo and Kengide are left. Before the deep fog sets in, Kengide offers a choice to Ibobo to pull up on shore and stop for the night-perhaps tempting fate in another way-or to continue on; they continue on the river, never make it to port, and lose their lives. Throughout *The Raft,* none of the actions of the men end up helping them: they are constantly at the mercy of forces beyond their control.

Conflict

One of the more prominent features of *The Raft* is the amount of conflict between the characters. Because the four men are stuck on a raft with little control over where they are going and what is happening to them, tempers constantly flare, and there is disagreement over what course they should take among the few choices they have. Much of conflict centers on Kengide. He is the leader of the group and seems to have the most experience on the river. But Kengide is also the most disagreeable and disrespectful character. He regularly expresses IDS opinions on every matter, but he accords only minimal politeness, at best, to others when they express opinions that he disagrees with. The other three men often argue with him and each other, a symptom of their frustration over the situation.

While the conflicts between the men form much of the dialogue and tension within the play, the only fatalities that occur because of it are found at the play's end. When the fog is thick and the port city seems nearby, Ibobo wants to jump off the raft and swim to shore. Kengide argues with him and will not let him go, holding him tightly and ensuring that both men die.

Death

The situation the four men are in becomes increasingly precarious as they are faced with leaving the raft or dying. The fear of and face of death adds to the unease of *The Raft.* Three of the four characters in *The Raft* end up dead, and though the fate of the

fourth character, Olotu, is uncertain, IDS former compatriots sometimes believe that he has died as well. Ogro is the only character to die totally unnecessarily. After the ship passes them in scene 3, Ogro decides to swim for it and to try to get picked up by it Instead, he is stoned by those on board and gets caught in the ship's propellers. Kengide and Ibobo survive to the end of the play. Kengide offers the option of pulling onshore for the night, which Ibobo decides would unnecessarily prolong their journey. They run into fog and Kengide will not even let Ibobo have the opportunity to try and save himself by swimming ashore. Both men die together. All of these deaths show how helpless people can be in the face of uncontrollable circumstances, implying that escape is futile.

Style

Setting

The Raft is set in times contemporary with when the play was written and takes place on the Niger River in Nigeria The play begins on the Niger Delta and ends somewhere past the port city of Burutu. All of the action is confined to the raft the four men are on that is to transport logs to Burutu The raft is traveling down the river to a fate unknown by its occupants. The action of the play is directly influenced by both the nature and the phenomenon of the Niger River.

Allegory

Many scholars and critics argue that *The Raft* is an allegory, though Clark does not acknowledge that it was consciously written as such. In an allegory, the story and its characters represent real events or ideas. In this case, many interpret it to be an allegory of political events in Nigeria in the time period in which it was written Nigeria was undergoing political unrest in the face of independence. Those who read the playas an allegory believe the four men represent the four old regions of Nigeria, the raft breaking up represents one of these regions breaking off, and the river represents the uncertain course of independence in Nigeria.

Symbolism

Whether or not the idea of *The Raft* as a political allegory is accepted, the play is full of symbolism open to varying interpretations. For example, the river and the raft could both be seen as symbolizing life: what is coming in the future is unknown. Unexpected circumstances can come up without notice. Nearly every aspect of *The Raft* can be seen as symbolizing some aspect of human existence.

Historical Context

Nigeria

In this time period, Nigeria was undergoing significant transformations, politically, socially, and otherwise. The longtime British colony officially won its independence in October 1960. Independence was expected to bring stability to Nigeria, but instead the country suffered much strife for many years. In the early years of independence, there were tensions between the four self-governing regions (west, east, north, and mid-west). Many critics believe that the four characters of *The Raft* represent these regions. When Nigeria became a republic in 1963, the regions were replaced by twelve states. Though this was expected to ease regional problems, it did not. Two censuses were taken in 196263 and 1963--64, which affected the division of power in the parliament. Many believed the census was inaccurate because of corruption, including the recounting of the same people several times. Bitter federal elections followed on December 30, 1964, with more accusations of crookedness. As a result, the government, headed by President Nnamdi Azikiwe and Prime Minister Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, collapsed within a year. It was helped along by a regional election in the west marred by murder, arson, and other crimes. Civ1l unrest in the form of riots occurred in 1965 and 1966. After a military coup on January 15, 1966, a military government was formed and many died. This was followed by civ1l war in 1967. Nigeria would be under military rule for much of the next two decades. Socially and economically, Nigeria also continued to struggle for years.

The United States

The early to mid-1960s was also a tumultuous time for the United States. Internationally, the ongoing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union resulted in the constant threat of nuclear war and the potential annihilation of humankind. The United States came to the brink: of nuclear war in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis The Soviet Union placed nuclear weapons aimed at the United States in the communist country of Cuba, located ninety miles off American shores. Though the Soviets backed down when an agreement was reached and the missiles were removed, the Cold War continued for three more decades. Some critics also believe this crisis influenced Clark when writing *The Raft.* Another looming international crisis that created uncertainty in the United States was American involvement in the conflict in Vietnam. Throughout the decade, American funding and the number of American troops escalated in Vietnam.

The United States also faced difficult domestic situations. The decade was marked by civil unrest, much of which focused on civil rights for African Americans There were social disagreements about integration and voting rights, as well as other issues. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlaws racial discrimination in public places and employment. Despite this law and others, the racial situation in the United States was difficult for years. There was resistance to integration,

especially in the South. Between 1964 and 1968, cities like Newark, New Jersey, Los Angeles, and Detroit suffered large-scale race riots. Like the men on *The Raft,* many in the United States were unsure about what the future would hold

Critical Overview

The Raft is not often performed because of the difficulties in staging it. One of the more prominent reasons is that much of the action takes place at night in the dark on a river. Most of the commentary is written by scholars who have generally given the play mixed reviews or qualified praise. Many have compared *The Raft* to the other two plays In the trilogy, with *The Raft* regarded as the weakest of three. For example, in a 1964 article in *Black Orpheus,* Anthony Astrachan writes, "The language is not so rich as in the other two plays; there are fewer metaphors, and the strengths lie in the evocation of life on the river and of Ijaw proverbs and customs rather than the virtue of the words themselves." In contrast, John Ferguson generally praises the playas different from Clark's previous work but suggests ist has significant problems. In a 1968 article in *Modern Drama,* he writes, "though the language is good, the themes are not always relevant, and the long conversations between Ibobo and Kengide as they coast down to Burutu seems used by the author to air his views on a miscellany of subjects.'

Critical opinion seems to become more positive, at least concerning certain aspects of the play, over the years. In 1975, T. O. McLoughlin wrote in *English Studies* in *Africa* that "Kengide is something of a watershed character for Clark. He stands between the sufferers in the first two plays [in the trilogy] and Ozidi in the latest play *[Ozidi]..* . In neither of the previous two plays do we find such resistance to death or the forces that control man's future." Two years later, Albert Olu Ashaolu in *Obsidian* believes, "the play provides the cumulative climax of the tragic sense of life which Clark has consistently developed from *Song of a Goat* through *The Masquerade."* In 1991, Abiola Irele wrote in the introduction to *Collected Plays and Poems,* 1958-1988, "From the point of view of structure and dramatic action, *The Raft* is certainly the most compact of Clark-Bekederemo's plays. There is a continuous flow of the action that contributes to the impression of concision already determined by the reduced world of the raft".

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
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Critical Essay #1

Petruso is a freelance author and screenwriter in Austin, Texas. In this essay, she discusses how the idea of uncertainty is employed in the play in both positive and negative ways and in terms of each character's death or disappearance.

Many critics and scholars who have written on John Pepper Clark's *The Raft* have argued that the play can be read as a metaphor for the helplessness of humankind and the uncertainty of life. They point out that the raft floats down the Niger River in the dark for much of the play. The lumbermen on the raft encounter obstacle after obstacle (whirlpools, storms, fog, large ships, and the splitting of the raft), and at least three characters (Ogro, Ibobo, and Kengide) die. Yet in two of the three deaths (Ogro and Ibobo), there are positive elements. They do not die passively, but hold out hope in the face of adversity. The fate of the fourth character, Olotu, is actually a positive uncertainty. Though many critics believe he died, his death is not shown, and there is no real reason to believe he has died. Even sense of the other characters in the play hold out hope for Olotu. In the end, humankind's fate does not seem completely uncertain in a negative way, though three of four characters die. There are moments, beacons of light, in what seems like total helplessness for the audience to hold on to.

Many critics have looked at *The Raft* in purely negative terms, including Albert Olu Ashaolu. Writing in *Obsidian,* he argues that "Irreversible destiny, man's helplessness in adversities, hostile and uncompromising society, inexplicable malevolent forces working against man-all these and other unpleasant experiences of man in his journey through life add up to shape Clark's cumulative tragic vision of life in *The Raft.* ,. Admittedly, *The Raft* has many dark moments. In addition to what is mentioned above, the raft is set adrift for somewhat mysterious reasons, there is little food aboard, and the men have situations in their individual lives to worry about, among other things. Yet they do everything in their power to survive, a positive undercurrent considering the situation.

Two of the deaths in the play contain positive aspects to them. Even though Ogro dies at the end of "Three: Iron and Fire," he goes down fighting. When the Naraguta, the Niger Company boat, nearly overuns the raft, the lumbermen manage to get their vessel out of the way. They avoid certain death with this maneuver. Ibobo wishes the raft were sturdier, so that they could be towed to port. Though this is not possible, it shows that the men continue to think in positive terms when opportunities present themselves. At the end of the scene, Ogro is willing to take a chance to at least save himself. He jumps in the water to climb aboard the ship, as he did when he was a young boy. Ogro dies only because those aboard the ship stone him with coals and beat his hands with iron bars. He falls back in the water and then dies when he gets cut up in the ship's propellers Ogro tries for what he thought was a moment of certainty-after all, he had done tills all the time as a child with positive results-in the face of the uncertain situation aboard the raft.

Ibobo's death at the end of the play also has something positive about it. Though he and Kengide are the only men left on the raft, they still believe they will make it to the port

city of Burutu and be paid for their work. Just before they reach their destination. a dense fog sets in so thick that they cannot see each other so they hold on to each other. When Ibobo smells the city nearby, he is ready to swim for it, just as Ogro did. He is willing to take the chance to live. rather than face the continued uncertainty aboard the raft. This chance is a more positive uncertainty than the negative one attached to the raft. The only reason he does not even attempt it is because of Kengide, the raft's *de facto* leader throughout the play. Kengide dissuades him two ways. First. he warns Ibobo that the water is full of predators and ships that could end up hurting or killing him. When Ibobo insists on jumping. Kengide physically restrains him. Though lbobo tries for his freedom. hitting Kengide. it is too late. The men apparently fall "over the waters" screaming "that long squeal as used when women go woods-gathering and by nightfall have still not found their way home: Ee-ee--ee-!!!" These quotations. Taken from the stage directions, imply the men fall over a waterfall and meet their doom. Yet Ibobo fought for his life to the end. He was ready to take action, though time and Kengide worked against him.

The uncertainty over Olotu' s disappearance is even more positive, both for the audience and the other men on the raft. Near the end of "Two: Windlash, , the four lumbermen encounter a storm, and Ogro suggests they use the mats to form a sail so they can get out of it. Olotu and Ibobo jump in to help him. As soon as the sail is up, however, the raft splits in two, and Olotu drifts off alone on the pan with the sail and mast. He cannot swim, so he cannot get back to the raft. Kengide prevents Ogro from jumping into the water and rescuing Olotu with a towrope. Kengide warns of sharks in the area and holds him back. Olotu is adrift, and the stage directions read. "All this while Olotu, now swept completely out of sight, has not stopped crying: 'Help, help, I can't leave the logs.'" The other three lumbermen never see him again, but there is nothing specifically written that says Olotu dies. This fact creates a positive uncertainty: He *could* have survived; there is hope. Even the three surviving lumbermen talk about this. In "Three: Iron and Fire," Kengide tells his companions, "If he was fool enough to leave the sail / On, he still will in all likelihood hit the bar *I* Before wind or tide carries him out. I tell / Youhe's already been picked up by fishermen.' ,

Despite these lines from the play, critic after critic argues that Olotu dies and use his "death" as an example of what they believe is unrelenting negativity in the play For example, in a volume of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* Robert IN. Wren Writes Olotu "is too loyal to his masters to leave the logs when the raft splits, but he is not wise enough to lower his sail, and he drowns." Another critic, T. O. McLaughlin, writes in an article pub lished in *English Studies in Africa* that "Olotu and Ogro do get away, but It is to their deaths." Such Critics do not consider that Olotu could have lived, that he could be safe, or that *The Raft* as a metaphor for life could have at least one clearly positive uncertainty to It. The human condition is not portrayed as unrelentingly negative as they make It out to be. Fate might have worked in Olotu's favor, but readers and Critics will never know, which gives his status real, but often overlooked, power.

There is only one man who does not fight his death in *The Raft,* and perhaps his attitude feeds these critics' opinions. Kengide often tries to stymie the others' attempts to save themselves and each other. He is the man with the most experience on the ship

and most likely the eldest as well. But in many ways, he is also the most negative human force in the play Kengide is often annoyed by the others on the raft. He argues with everyone and dislikes Ogro's singing, Olotu's background, and Ibobo's sympathies for the other men. Kengide does have moments of kindness In "Four: Call of Land," Kengide wants to pull on shore for the night before they reach port but presses on because Ibobo would like to sleep in a real bed that night. But these times are few. Mostly Kengide harps on the other lumbermen, dictates how they handle the dangerous situations they encounter, and allows Olotu to daft into the unknown and Ibobo to die.

Kengide is the epitome of humankind' s fearfulness in the play. When Kengide is in control With the men following his orders, he keeps his cool. But when he is not and potentially facing being alone, he cannot handle the uncertainty. This happens at the play's end, when he does not fight for his life. Ibobo is ready to swim to shore in the fog and at least try to save himself. Kengide prevents Ibobo from jumping off the raft. Though he says to Ibobo, "Go on! Jump and take me with you," It is not so they can both try to swim away because Kengide continues to hold him down Kengide admits he is afraid to be alone, but had he taken the same chance as Ibobo desperately wanted to, the pair might have made It, separately or together. Instead, both plunge to their deaths because of Kengide. Though Kengide is arguably the play's main character, he has *The Raft's* weakest mettle. Despite the efforts of Kengide and the play's critics, the positive aspects of *The Raft,* especially in the uncertainty of Olotu' s situation, cannot be disregarded. Clark implies that there is always at least little hope in the face of uncertainty in humankind's existence.

Source: A Petruso, Critical Essay on *The Raft,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Uwandu analyzes The Raft *and two other of Clark's early plays. Great art's universal, but before it is universal, it has to be thoroughly local; it has to bear the signature of a people and a way of life*

The above quotation from Enc Bentley's *What is Theatre* should guide us in our appraisal of J. P Clark's dramatic art. This paper assumes that a better understanding of Clark's early plays depends on our understanding of the world-view that gave birth to them as well as an understanding of how they are built This is quite true when we consider the fact that most works on Clark's dramaturgy are focused on the interpretation of the meaning of the plays than on the analysis of their composition. While this paper does not intend to formulate a new or a complete re-interpretation of Clark's early drama, it is hoped that it will shed light on salient aspects of his dramaturgy which have received critical attention over the years.

In order to make a meaningful analysis of his early plays, we must remind ourselves that Clark is a prominent figure in the literary history of Nigeria In particular and Africa in general. He belongs to the first group of African writers in English whose works show heavy colouration of traditional and cosmopolitan influences. As a literary artist, he has a number of publications to his credit. These include plays, a semi-autobiographical novel, a collection of essays, a collection of published poems among other literary endeavours. Since his retirement as Professor of English at the University of Lagos, he became the Director of Pec Repertory Theatre, Onikan, Lagos. It is in realization of the above, and many more contributions of Clark to the literary and dramatic scene of Nigeria and Africa, that James Vinson regards him as a "renaissance Man." This is because he faced the obligation, by virtue of his belonging to a small elite of educated men, of playing more than one role in society, thereby exhibiting a characteristic feature of the European Renaissance.

By all indications, J. P. Clark is unique in the context of Nigerian drama. His uniqueness lies in the fact that unlike his contemporaries, Wole Soyinka and Ene Henshaw, among others of the 1960 literary caucus, he does not concern himself with topical issues. Unlike them also, he does not attempt a synthesis between the old and the new in his pays his first three plays. Instead, he draws materials for his work from traditional sources. His work is characterized by extensive use of verse which gives his drama a quality seen by Martin Esslin as "highly sophisticated simplicity."

Perhaps, it may be necessary at this point to take a cursory look at the three plays on which the present paper is designed. In other to fully appreciate these plays vis-à-vis the criticisms on them, we must bear in mind that the three plays are deeply rooted in Ijaw culture. It is not surprising then to find out that the situations and the characters Clark has created in them remain true to their original and native contexts.

One salient feature of Clark's drama is that they deal with the human problem, based on personal and local terms.

His first play, *Song of a Goat,* concerns Zifa, a fisherman, who, in Clark's own words, "loses his sexual powers, abilities, and sends his wife for the birth cure". The result of this is that the local doctor-the Masseur-recommends that he should make his wife over to someone else in the family. Both husband and wife reject this suggestion. In the long run, Zifa's wife, Ebiere, seduces her brother-in-law, Tonye, and becomes pregnant for him. The resultant tragedy stems from this.

Clark's second play, *The Masquerade,* is a follow-up from the first. Here, the son of the incestuous relationship in the first play, Tufa, grows up in exile and is about to take a wife when the circumstances of his birth and parentage are called to question His would-be father-in-law, Diribi, objects to further consummation of the marriage on the frounds that his daughter should not marry a man with a curse on his head. His daughter's insistence on contracting the marriage results to tragedy.

The next play, *The Raft,* is concerned with the ominous fate of four lumbermen on a Niger creek who drift to inevitable destruction.

J. P Clark's uniqueness as a dramatic has given rise to a variety of adverse criticisms. A review of such criticisms will be useful in assessing his worth as a dramatist. Most of Clark's critics raise Issues relating to the social relevance of his plays.

For instance, Frances Ademola, writing on "Clark and His Audience" argues that,

Although Clark is essentially concerned with man's relationship to his world, what baffles people is that this world appears remote from contemporary realities.

Contrary to Ademola's view above, It is possible to argue that the world which Clark's plays depict is relevant and realistic to the Nigerian society because a greater percentage of Nigerians live in the traditional society.

From another perspective, Peter Kennard has alleged that Clark is using drama to convey a restricted and very partial attitude to life, an attitude which is characterized in "pictorial" rather than "dramatic" visions.

In effect, Kennard is suggesting that, by using symbolic situations, Clark makes his incidents exist in space rather than in time, and so complete in themselves without reference to their contexts in the plays

In another vein, some of Clark's critics feel that his plays are melodramatic. Prominent in this school of thought is Ogin Ogunba who makes the following allegation:

Clark's sense of tragedy is melodramatic. The tragic premise is never well-established and we are often suddenly plunged into the midst of a tragic situation without warning, sometimes with the author violating plausibility.

Ogunba goes on to share other Critics' view that *Song of a Goat,* for example, is a sick play. He equally agrees with the allegation that a certain ominous note keeps sounding

from the very first scene. Hence, he concludes that, "by the time the play ends, we are oppressed by the melodrama and we are happy to leave the theatre".

Ogunba's remarks are significant because they pass judgement on the total dramatic experience which Clark recreates. One can posit right away that the situations in Clark's plays are not as implausible as critics would want us to believe. This is because, to an African audience, the plays are quite plausible especially when we consider the contexts of the social realities of the characters. For instance, in the social setting of *Song of a Goat,* Zifa and Tonye are men full of self-pride, who are conscious of the social implications of kindred and personal honour. Tonye, on his part, is equally aware of the social stigma attendant on his incestuous act with his brother's wife. Faced with this fact, it becomes difficult for him to face his elder brother. In the light of this, he has to take a decision-one which affects his future as well as that of his community. His decision may sound implausible to non-African readers and spectators who will argue that Tonye has many alternatives to choose from. But we know that in the context of Ijaw tradition from which Clark drew his story, there is only one choice open to him in the face of such an over-whelming shame. suicide.

Again, in *The Masquerade,* Diribi's conduct is equally plausible. Clark presents Diribi as a highly impulsive and choleric man who has great pride in solid personal achievement as well as in the purity of his family line. His choleric excesses notwithstanding, We are convinced that Diribi did what he did, first and foremost, to fore-stall a possible taint on his family as well as avoid the concomitant social stigma.

The question of plausibility has been extended to the *The Raft.* This is with particular reference to the behavior of the lumbermen in the play. In this instance, we know that in the history of plays, the will of tragic characters is often paralysed by the enormity of the situations they have to grapple with, it is not out of place, therefore, to find the characters in *The Raft* trying to compensate for their glaring paralysis by long and tedious rationalizations of their plight.

On the charge that Clark's plays are melodramatic, we make haste to argue that the emotions expressed in these plays are not exaggerated nor are the actions sensational as are characteristic of melodrama. The cataclysmic events in the lives of the protagonists in these plays are brought about by internal conflicts, with attendant external factors. When we realize that, in the world of these plays, there are forces within man as well as transcending man, we can appreciate how these forces came into play in the dramatic moments of the plays. The effect, in the tragic world which Clark depicts, the full potential of the tragic qualities within the characters are brought into focus through external forces

There is a much-repeated assertion that Clark's drama is Imitative of Greek tragedy, especially the Oresteia. The chief exponents of this view are Hilary Spurling and Nkem Nwankwo.

For Spurling, John Pepper Clark makes no attempt to disguise the apparatus of Greek tragedy; if anything, he emphasizes it so that we may enjoy Ins borrowings as old friends in a fresh setting.

Spurling may have arrived at the above conclusion because of the characteristic similarities that exist between the Greek plays and Clark's. These similarities may be in the form of neighbours (whom they see as chorus, the nature of the gods, the fearful crimes and the prophecies of doom. In the same manner Nkem Nwankwo is of the view that *Song of a Goat* derives its structure from Greek Tragedy A third view is expressed by Oyekan Owomoyela to the effect that *Song of a Goat* is "a slavish imitation of Aeschylean tragedy With some Shakespearean touches added."

In the light of the criticism above, we may grant that there are features of Clark's plays which parallel those of classical tragedy. However, we must be careful not to postulate that his plays derive from the Greek forms. Tills is because a close analysis of Clark's plays will reveal that the differences between the progression of consciousness in Clark's drama and those of Ancient Greek playwrights automatically invalidate any theory of derivation. In tills regard, whatever parallels or similarities that exist between both sets of plays can be ascribed to the probability that the cultures of both civilizations (Greek and indigenous Ijaw) developed in a parallel fashion. While we are not denying the possibility of Greek or foreign influences on Clark in his plays, Clark himself has provided us a guide towards a correct appraisal of his dramatic efforts. This is contained in his insistence that,

The question is not that one group of people borrowed this or that property from another but that there can, in fact, there do occur areas of coincidence and correspondence in the way of living among several peoples separated by vast distances and time, and who apparently are of instinct cultures, practices and persuasions.

In fact, there we myriads of critiques on Clark's plays whose connotations cannot be fully exhausted in the present paper. However, we may look at two or more assertions which seem to question the structure of Clark's drama. We are not going to dwell much on the suggestion that Clark's plays have no beginning There is a simple answer to this: The literary artist should be free to begin the action of his work at whatever point of his storyline that seems appropriate for what he wishes to communicate-provided he can handle it effectively. This is purely a stylistic choice. Here, we may agree with C. T. Maduka that

Literary artists use various structural strategies to reveal hidden truths about life In their works, structure and meaning interact to produce a vision of life of society which could enrich the experiences of the reader This vision when effectively portrayed gives the reader food for thought and even helps him in grappling with problems of human existence.

Sometimes, however, the search for, and, insistence on the standard Western elements of unity of action, balanced plot or progressive development of character in our

appreciation of African plays in English may make us miss the point when we apply them rigidly to Clark's tragedies. It is for this reason that T.O. Onyonyor says:

The true beginning of tragedy is the moment of crisis, the moment of self's confrontation with self, the moment in which man realises Ins apparent aloneness in the face of danger and is forced to make that fateful decision that will make or mar him and his house permanently.

Similarly, Solomon Iyasere recommends that the native character of the literature, that is, the "habitat of the work" should be considered in order to determine the nature of criticism to be applied.

Another set of observations and critiques is relevant for our purpose, especially, because, they give the impression of structural deficiency in his dramaturgy. In this group is Adrian Roscoe who feels that J. P. Clark's *Song of Goat* "bears the marks of indecision and is clearly a work or low voltage". He goes further to suggest that the play succeeds as poetry not as drama and that Clark was able to bring into the play's theme, setting and structure all the CritIcal test of the Honours School of English, but none of the life-giving sense of real theatre.

Allied to the above is Dan Izevbaye's opinion that "Clark's problems as a dramatist arises mainly from hIs lack of interest in, or experience of, the stage". These observations, as we have hinted, pOint at the structure of Clark's plays. However, while we can, to a certain extent, agree that "lack of interest in, or experience of, the stage" can constitute an impediment to a playwright's effectiveness, It is clear that by "stage" Izevbaye is specifically referring to the suitability of the plays for a proscemum state performance. We are therefore constrained by his observation to ask whether all plays, especially African plays, must relate to the possibilities of the proscenium arch theatre-that is, in the light of the social realities and setting of J. P. Clark's plays. The above observation also holds for Martin Banham who expresses his views about Clark's "lack of familiarity" with the stage in the following manner:

As a playwright, Clark has seemed to suffer from a lack of familiarity with the demands of the theatre, and his plays have never fitted as comfortably on to the stage as have Soyinka's The latter's craftsmanship stems from a close practical knowledge of the theatre as a director and actor, whereas Clark has no comparable experience. One result is that Clark's characters tend to talk where they might act, to recite where they should converse, and to remain static where they should move.

In addition to the several castigations of Clark's drama, there is one which leaves the impression that Clark's dramas do not qualify as "tragedies". In his review of Clark's *Song of a Goat,* R. G. Armstrong asserts that the central character, Zifa, does not have the "stature of tragedy" This type of allegation has been made of his other plays, and provides the occasion to discuss the world of Clark's three plays. Before we do this, we must, however, admit that, contrary to established critical views, the general plot and motivation of great tragedies are not the same everywhere, especially when we realize that unidentical nature of man everywhere

The tragic world which J. P. Clark paints in his plays is at once ambiguous, dark and brooding Of this world T. Onyonyor writes:

The tragic world of J P Clark is one in which man, Impelled by forces within and beyond him, consciously and unconsciously brings misfortune on himself because of his violation of natural law It is a world which acknowledges the involvement of spirits, ancestors, gods and other invisible influences on human affairs. These super-natural forces, acting through man, intervene in human affairs for good or ill, depending on the situation and the moral purity of the parties concerned

From the above, an understanding of the worldview of the I Jaw community in which Clark's plays are set will provide much insight into the interpretation of the plays. Clark himself is Ijaw by birth. His plays, therefore, are symbolic of the debt an artist owes, from his understanding of his culture, to create awareness concerning the life of his people in particular and life in general. It is not surprising then that Clark's plays are set in Ijaw-land where, according to Augustine Oghide, "the creeks, seas, tides, boats, ships and forests are essential elements in the people's lives."

In Clark's drama, we are all the time confronted with the locality of his plays This is male possible by his use of apt metaphors to authenticate their setting: the "tide", "storm", and so on. Even, Images which reflect the people's stock-in-trade like "fishing", "hunting" and "farming", are employed The success of Clark's drama, therefore, should be seen, first and foremost, in his ability to depict the experiences of his people-the Ijaws of Nigeria-in an art form.

Clark's rootedness in Ijaw culture is even more evident in his character portrayal. On this Clark himself writes:

The characters in my plays are ordinary Ijaw persons working out their life's tenure at particular points on the state, and they are speaking in their own voices and language.

From the observation above by the playwright himself, it is not difficult to see why the heroes in his plays are simple village people, noble in their own ways and without any major Crimes attributed to them when the play opens. In addition, we realize that although Clark sets his drama in Ijaw-land, he aims at the same time to expose man's plight within a particular African culture. This is why his drama is full of situations of grief, chaos, insecurity or helplessness and irredeemable loss, which Romanus Egudu sees as "the hallmark of the deftly woven fabric that is Clark's drama."

In recognition of these various opinions about Clark's drama we can associate most, if not all the problems raised by his critics, with problems of structure. An examination of the structure of the plays is, therefore, justified by this. However, since the scope of this paper does not give us the liberty to delve into a full structural analysis of the three plays, we shall, in this paper, drop hints that will enable us do a detailed analysis in a subsequent study.

In considering the structure of J P. Clark's *Three Plays* we should bear in mind that none of them can be taken as his dramatic type. For instance, it will be a mistake, which will lead to misunderstanding of his art, if we judge the other two plays into the form of *Song of a Goat.* This is because the form of an art work varies from author to author.

There is, in effect, in each of Clark's plays discussed in this paper, an event which we can point at if we are to explain what happens in the play. For instance, in *Song of a Goat,* there is the sudden loss of fertility of Zifa, the prescription of a fertility "cure" by the Masseur, and the seduction of Tonye by Ebiere In this play also, we have the sacrifice of a goat, the prophecies of the half-possessed Orukorere, the rantings of the neighbours and the suicide of Tonye and ZIfa.

Similarly, In *The Masquerade,* the following issues are treated' the inherited curse of Tufa, the sudden love between Tufa and Titi, and the objection of TIti's parents to her marriage with Tufa. In addition, the comments of the neighbours and others who act as chorus are highlighted. Finally, the pathetic death of Titi, Tufa and Diribi is presented in quick succession as the play reaches its climax.

In the third play, *The Raft,* we are presented with the gloomy destiny of the four lumbermen on the raft, the loss of Olotu, the death of Ogro and the fearful uncertainties about the fate of Kengide and Ibobo.

From the foregoing discussion, we can argue that the various scenes in the dramatic action of each of the plays are held together and given continuity and tension in the light of the world-view that gave birth to them Secondly, we can argue that since dramatic from is made up of four inter related elements: theme, character, action and diction, the imbalance in interpretation of Clark's drama which we have referred to earlier results from the overemphasis placed on anyone of these elements to the exclusion of the others.

Source: Darnel Newedo Uwandu, "J. P. Clark's Dramatic Art: The Experimental Stage of His Dramatic Writing," in *The Literary Half-Yearly,* Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, July 1995, pp. 69-80.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, McLoughlin explores commonalities and differences in theme and context in Clark's early plays.

John Pepper Clark's early plays show the influence of established European literary forms, yet Nigerian myths and cultural attitudes have so asserted themselves in his most recent play, *Ozidi,* that his artistic manner has changed considerably. His fascination for the Ijaw saga of Ozidi has an odd sense of culmination for a writer who has spent his dramatic career turning back to his cultural roots: odd because he has integrated his formal educational influences with his more local traditional influences at a comparatively early age, *Ozidi* having been published when he was only 31.

The interesting point about John Pepper Clark is that his awareness of what he calls "traditional" and "native" influences has come to dominate what he has learned from western literature. He is conscious of the two cultures in tension. On the one hand he gives convincing proof that the springs of drama in Nigeria are "in the early religious and magical ceremonies and festivals of the peoples of this country". Nigeria's drama, in other *words,* did not start at the University of Ibadan. Yet without that institution the flowering might have been a lot slower, and Clark acknowledges that the imported skills learned at that kind of institution have helped to generate the new writers. "The new playwright in Africa", he says, "though employing a European idiom and technique, plies a traditional art form."

His own progress from Warri to schools in Okrika and Jeremi, to Warri Government College and to the University of Ibadan to read English Honours is a typical enough cursus through local and more sophisticated education. Until he went to Ibadan he grew up in the midst of local Warri influences. He comes, as he puts it, from "ancient multiple stock in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria from which I have never quite felt myself severed". The repeated locale of his plays, the river delta area, confirms this sense of rootedness in the sensuous, social, cultural and mythological character of a particular place. Most of his characters take their livelihood from the river and the sea. In his work the tides, the creeks, the ships, ports, fog have a teasing fascination: sometimes they are symbolic of loneliness, chaos and death, but always they are firm images of a particular people and their way of life.

The sea itself is referred to as a metaphoric presence early in *The Masquerade* and at the end of *The Raft.* Clark's poem addressed to Olokun, goddess of the sea, concludes with this obeisance:

So drunken, like ancient walls
We crumble in heaps at your feet, And as the good maid of the sea, Full of rich bounties for men,
You lift us all beggars to your breast

The strongly felt emotional flux from rum to hope, and the ritual action of falling down and being raised up captures the movement of the sea, with the control and subtlety of an artist working with immediate and felt experiences It typifies the relation of Clark to his local surrounds.

It is not surprising then that his main themes in the first two plays, *Song of a Goat* (Ibadan, 1962) and *The Masquerade* (Oxford, 1964), have local pertinence: fertility, respectable family lineage, a husband thwarted by forces outside his control, families feuding. These themes are worked out within the ambience of the Masseur, a crippled itinerant who is doctor and oracle, and Orukorere, a half-possessed aunt. The language is laced with an animalistic imagery of goats, leopards, hens, cocks, lizards, snakes, all of which evoke a local rather than a Beckett-like universal setting.

But Clark's protagonists do struggle with broader situations than their context might suggest. They are caught in the frustrations of failure In the opening scenes of *Song of a Goat* in which Zifa's wife consults the Masseur because she is now barren, her language has the suppressed, controlled despair of a wife who wants to remain loyal to her husband yet realizes that he is Impotent, that "there Isn't just a pith to the stout staff'. Zifa knows she is anxious and hopes against hope that he will not be permanently Impotent, declaring "the thing/May come back any day, who knows? The rains/Come when they will." But the natural imagery of water, fertility, seasons, all part of what Clark calls the language of "indirection", works against Zifa's hopes His own and his wife's conversation with the Masseur is courteous, sensitive, respectful of intimate feelings of shame and pride; but the accumulation of images of fecundity-bringing forth fruit, raising green thatch, tilling the fertile soil-stands in contradistinction to imagery of death, as in the comment "they have picked my flesh To the bones like fish a floating corpse". This latter Imagery makes it clear that because Zifa is impotent he will wither and die. In an imagistic context of fertility he is doomed to a passionate but fruitless isolation Clark says of Zifa that he is an Ijaw fisherman who loses the will to live when he loses potency and all hope of further procreation His surely is a tragic passion as the Greeks knew It, and as only primitive people today, like Garcia Lorca's and mine, may know it.

It is helpful to recognize constructional and thematic ties between these first two plays and Greek tragedy, but to dwell on them any more than Clark does is an injustice to what the plays offer. *Song of a Goat* is not a Greek tragedy that fails to come off Certain aspects of Greek drama which Critics have overlooked give the playa universal pathos; but because these aspects are in the service of plays as patently rooted in the particular traditions and mores of Nigeria as Greek tragedy was in those of Greece they should not be considered as imitated but as adapted.

Clark suggests that there is a similar handling of tragic passion in his and in the Greek plays. This passion is farmed by the older women, particularly Orukorere in *Song of a Goat* and Oreame in *Ozidi.* Worn by time and experience their words have a prophetic sadness. Thus, when Zifa's wife Ebiere dies, his aunt Orukorere wearily foresees the death of the whole family:

There, another blow
Has been dealt the tree of our house, and see
How the sap pours out to spread our death I
Believe it, now I believe it
White ants
Have passed their dung on our roof-top.
Like a tree rotten in the rain, it
Topples. What totem is there left now for the tribe to hold on to for support?

The images of collapse are permeated with a sense of inevitability: the life has already gone out of the wood, and this in spite of Ebiere's good intentions and the Masseur's kindly advice. Good motives in a complex situation have brought nothing but disaster. Likewise in *The Masquerade* the father, Diribi, has traditional honour on his side to justify his anger. He is "lashed by forces fit/To confound forests" because his daughter wants to marry a bastard, a "cur without pedigree", and he cries out:

Must I kill her, too, this witch and b-h Who has quite infected her breed and Now makes corruption of all that is sacred?

The passion is justified, but its consequences are pitiable In both plays the parent generation finds itself inextricably involved in turbulent emotions which their children have brought upon them.

The protagonists are not, however, akin to traditional Greek tragic heroes: they are not "wanton boys" struggling against the gods The Imagery, a factor which Clark repeatedly stresses in his criticism, never suggests those proportions. Zifa, Tufa and Kengide have nothing of the stature of Ozidi, but are more like anti-heroes, playing out their difficulties In a limited metaphoric arena. They suffer or survive, not according to fate, but as a result of their own resources to resist the pressures that isolate them from their society. Death is the defeat of self. It does not purge. If we regard *The Raft* as a development of Clark's concern In the previous plays with the dramatic function of death, we see that he is working at something other than a Greek tragic model.

The problems he tackles in the first two plays fertility, family lineage, infidelity-are played out In a context similar to that in Greek tragedy and among people with similar attitudes to the family; but Clark's explorations are not Into heroism or avenging fate. At the end of the two plays less attractive features of his society stick In the mind. The legend surrounding Tufa in *The Masquerade,* the bogus suitor from another village come to entice away a local belle, gives no room for heroism or even sympathy for Tufa, for he and Titi are presented as victims of social traditions embodied in the fiery prejudices of Titi's father Diribi. The latter is a BrabantIo figure whose daughter has been "corrupted/By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks". Like Brabantio, Diribi is covetous of his daughter, whIch would be no fault If he were not also so pretentiously moralIstic and intolerant of youthful romance. Moreover, local convention, the priests, and legend are against Titi. The priests contemptuously relate her death: "Now she lies squashed/Like a lizard in the sand " Yet, as the priests acknowledge, she had "the dream of all girls" in wanting to love and be loved. Social pressures had militated

against her in the mind of her father, as they had done against Zifa in the mind of Ebiere. In *The Masquerade* Diribi feels his family lineage has been insulted. No less does Tufa feel that his rights as a husband to Titi have been violated. From that tension between a husband's rights and a society's traditions comes the pathos, for neither wins in any meaningful sense, and there is no victorious s passion or feeling of vindication. Neither the survivors nor the dead have won anything.

We have to wait for *The Raft* to see what positive values Clark means to assert. Here the same sense of unmitigated waste is countered by something more positive. Again, people die, victims of their own failings. Unlike Orestes or Agamemnon or Macbeth or Hamlet the main characters hold no prominent position in society; nor do the survivors.

All are local Ijaw, unknown and unsung even within their own community, men doing a job of work. Of them, two prove foolish, two wise, and whereas wisdom in the previous plays was not an issue, in *The Raft* it is In the limited sense that survival is affirmed to be better than death.

The point is made in *The Raft* by Kengide, an old lumberman At times he is cynical, testy, cantankerous, but always a realist. Moreover, he is no passive sufferer like old Orukorere. He repeatedly sees the journey on the raft as symbolic of his people's aimlessness; and in his affirmation, "Truly/ We are a castaway people" he states more Positively what was latent in the earlier plays.

But Kengide is not a romantic either, and herein lies Clark's second positive assertion. He is the first to say that the raft is caught in "the great Osikoboro whirlpool", admitting the truth so frightening to the others. Only by facing reality does he keep sane. The immediate details and pressures of being adrift are a challenge to reasonableness which each of his companions tries to avoid. Afraid to admit their plight and to allow that there is no escape from fear except in the mind, they try to change their predicament. Olotu and Ogro do get away, but it is to their deaths. Only Kengide accepts the finality of being a castaway, and he alone is able to live with the situation. In knowing danger when he sees it and in recognizing the deceitful hopes of those who run in the face of it, he accepts his limitations and thus retains his judgement.

It is important to see the differences between Kengide and the others because his realistic appraisals, his refusal to put up with the anxieties and romantic illusions of his companions protect him against a tragic death. He watches the loss of Olotu and Ogro with a cynical acceptance. When at the end Ibobo' s fears make rum frantic to go ashore and he gradually cracks under the strain of admitting that the raft is helplessly adrift, Kengide remains assertive of initiative, sanity and the need for company. Life may be bitter, sordid and corrupt, but the altruism of Ogro and the hopes of Ibobo are dangerous and foolish compared with the assurance of someone else's company in the darkness and uncertainty of not knowing where you are or where you are going.

Kengide is something of a watershed character for Clark He stands between the sufferers in the first two plays and Ozidi in the latest play. He is a workman exploited by his employers. As a victim he sees the need to scorn heroic gestures of protest: victims

need one another if they are to survive. Thus, when at the end Kengide and Ibobo go on down to the sea shouting out at the dark, it is a dismal predicament; but the spirit of Kengide is demonstrative of life for if it were not for Kengide, Ibobo would succumb to death by throwing himself into the river teeming with sharks In neither of the previous two plays do we find such resistance to death or the forces that control man's future Zifa in, *Song of a Goat* gives himself to the sea as Ibobo would like to, Tufa in *The Masquerade* dies asking, "how is it they left me loose/To litter such destruction?". Kengide would never have let him reach so vulnerable a stage. If we see Kengide in these terms, *Ozidi* is less of a break from Clark's previous writing than it may at first appear

As Clark tells us in a prefatory note, the play is based on an Ijaw saga. Not unexpectedly Kengide dismissed the Ozidi story as "mere mud", but for Clark the saga provides a framework of epic proportions. The play is almost as long as the first three put together, with a cast of well over fifty. The action is at times reminiscent of the *Iliad,* the *Aeneid,* and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar.* Ozidi the father, a warrior-like figure, and his elder but idiot brother Temugedege are rivals for the throne of Orea. The family situation of the earlier plays has been broadened on a much wider social and political scale. The division within the family-Ozidi has locked up his brother because he thinks him incapable of the Job-is reflected in the public sphere where Ofe, the popular leader, plans to kill Ozidi knowing that he and his group can control Temugedege. Ozidi goes to his death through a sequence of bad omens strongly reminiscent of the Caesar story in Shakespeare The consequent disorder, the offence to Ozidi's family and the corruption in Ores under the ineffectual Temugedege, must Walt for their reforms by Ozidi's son who, like many a hero in classical epics, will have to assert himself by his own prowess in single combat. Moreover he is assured of victory by the help of supernatural powers, in particular his grandmother-witch, Oreame. The climax (a four-day fight with Ofe his chief enemy and leader of the murderers of his father), the saving intervention of Oreame and the stakes themselves echo the great contests of Achilles and Hector, of Aeneas and Turnus in classical literature, indeed epic fights in many literatures.

The fight is played out at levels other than the physical and ritual. Just as *The Raft* succeeds dramatically because of its sustained tensions (those between Kengide's cynical realism and the willful individualism of his companions, and in the last scene between Ibobo's fear and Kengide's defiance), so in *Ozidi* there is a similar opposition of sentiment at the thematic level. The play is a celebration of Ozidi the warrior, but there is much within It reminiscent of the depressing end to *The Masquerade.* For example, Ozidi is never liberated from anxiety. Bad dreams of vengeance haunt him and he seems doomed to live in a perpetual state of fear. Like Macbeth he wants to protect himself against his enemies only to find that he is threatened, as was Macbeth by Fleance, by the next generation, the sister and son of Tebesonoma:

Take it from me, Ozidi, except you mur der them too, Twenty years from now, as you did with your father's assassins, you shall be called to account

The struggle is reinforced by further echoes of epic and tragic literature. Ozidi's son, like Orestes, returns from exile to avenge his father's murder and is thrown into a dramatic

situation which he does not fully understand. His own mother, Orea, who nevertheless wants him to renounce his role of public valour, complains:

I have only this one child and I do
All I can to keep him under cover of
My roof But you always incite him to fly out
Among black-kites

Yet like Achilles he has an invulnerable protection in battle, and like so many heroes of saga literature he has a sword "not seen before by eyes of man". Thus equipped and sustained, Ozidi the younger is the invincible harbinger of revenge for his family. But when he dies we are not at all assured that the whole cycle will not repeat itself, perhaps in favour of the other side.

It is difficult to see what are the rewards of the struggle for vengeance. An uncomfortable feature of Clark's plays is the lack of a redemptive theme, the want of any adequate consolation for the waste of human life and suffering. There is a Senecan justice in Ozidi's son revenging the murder of his father, but in this Ijaw saga justice does not work on a *quid pro quo* basis. It does not bring order or hope or peace to the external world. Society remains vulnerable. Suspicion, fear, malevolence and corruption are not reduced by feuds and death. These are not the cost of a better world. Family honour is set right, a point is made, but that is all and only for the moment. The society is forever at war with itself.

Furthermore Ozidi learns little from the experience. The supernatural powers of the opposing witches, Oreame and Azema, the spell of the old wizard of the forest and the whole backdrop of magic reduce his final significance. The decisions in his world are made and worked out on a level at which he is powerless Like Orestes he will have blood for blood; but his grandmother's lust for vengeance, like Clytemnestra's, colours the entire play, and Ozidi is never anything more than an actor in her revenge drama. As the Story-Teller says of the fight between Ozidi and Odogu whose wife Ozidi means to abduct:

. . . For as the bowels of Ozidi
Boil over in rage from the mortar-and-pestle charm
So the bowels of Odogu.
Unknown to either,
The old wizard of the forest Bouakarakarabiri
Or Tebekawene, as some call him after
HIs habit of walking on his head, has invested
The other with his celebrated master charm,
Thus creating our deadlock

Not only are Ozidi and his protagonists ignorant of certain forces within their situation, they are powerless to curb or excite them. The element of tragedy does not develop to the horrifying proportions of the *Oresteia* largely because Ozidi, unlike his father, is

never asked to make a fateful decision. Nor does Clark intend him to be concerned with such choices. More important is the climate and significance of magic.

Ozidi's future is foretold, approved and worked out by characters like the Old Woman, the Old Man of the Forest, and the witch Oreame. His reaction to them is never critical or anything but responsive. Only at the end does he cut down Oreame, a mistake it seems, and in so doing reduces himself to a more human level. The relation is a passive one and differs in its dramatic possibilities from that between, say, Macbeth and his witches. *The Tempest, Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* and *Dr. Faustus* rely on magic for much of their dramatic impact but where this is meant to be taken seriously, as in Faustus's conjuring, the audience's belief in the supernatural is not challenged so much as its Critical ability to see the action as a dramatic metaphor of the tensions between intellectual pride and spiritual fear. It is feasible that the principal characters can renounce their involvement in the magic at any time: Faustus has the chance to repent, Prospero is able to say at the end, "I'll break my staff. . I'll drown my book." Ozidi, however, is powerless in this respect. As a boy he is taunted by his playmates for not knowing who he is. His mother and grandmother exacerbate his curiosity by not telling him. From first to last he is provoked by and entangled in the unknown. In the scene in which the Old Man of the forest goes through his ritual with Oreame and the boy Ozidi to ensure that "No sword wielded by man may cut through/His skin nor any spear or bullet wound pass/Beyond a bump," Ozidi has no foreknowledge of the ceremony or of what the wizard will do or why. The forces of magic are protective, as are the gods of Aeneas, but never problematical as they are to Faustus.

But the play is no worse because it is not concerned with free will or choice. In *The Raft* Agro dies because he chooses a certain course of action and it can be argued that his character is such that his choice is predictable. Nevertheless he does choose and, by contrast, Kengide is too wise to the world to do otherwise than choose to run no risks. Ozidi's role, however, is much more a predetermined one. Past events IN the family history, the memory and spirit of his grandmother give him no chance other than to play the role of expiator.

This mechanistic trait and the absence of human choice could be expected to reduce the dramatic tension. Even IN the bleaker drama of Samuel Beckett and in certain plays of Athol Fugard there is still the freedom to choose how to cope with despair or nihilism or social and political rejection. But the nature of the Ozidi saga is such that Clark does not dwell on Ozidi's relations to a society or even to a particular person Ozidi seldom questions or retaliates against the people closest to him. Like many characters in Homer's epics his character does not change or develop as a result of his experience; he simply grows physically stronger and acquires the skills and accoutrements necessary to his role. We may talk of his development only in this very limited sense.

All of this raises the question of the kind of drama we are dealing with in *Ozidi* Again one might ask whether it is a tragedy in the Greek mould that fails, or something else. The answer depends on seeing the role of Ozidi the younger in the right light. He is a hero only in the sense of being the warrior who defeats all his enemies. But to say even this is to give him more credit than is his due. Tebesonoma, like most of Ozidi's

opponents, realizes that Ozidi has supernatural powers on his side. Having tied up Ozidi, he taunts him:

Call for her, poor suckling boy, call for your mother and let's see whether she can hear
And get you out of this

Tebesonoma has taken on much more than Ozidi, for the powers that protect and guide Ozidi are his real opponents. Rather than trying to see Ozidi as a hero we should recognize that what the plot and characters might lose by simplification, the drama gains by admitting layers of spiritual and miraculous influence. We have to accept Ozidi as a character within tills genre together with the peculiarities of the genre.

Do we have then the exciting and frightening world of, say, Tolkien in which all kinds of magic and strange mythologies are admitted, serious in their own terms, but tenuously related to a realistic or historical truth? Or do we have the expression of a local African saga through recognizable literary conventions, serious in Itself and a significant comment on life as lived in Nigeria, and possibly on that lived elsewhere?

An audience unfamiliar with Ijaw rituals and mythology can respond only in much the same sort of way as they would to Tolkien but they will still inevitably go on to place the experience of the play into a recognizable relation with the broader body of their own experience and reading. This is certainly possible If, as Auerbach says of the concept of God, one regards the magical element not as a cause but a symptom of Clark's way of comprehending and representing things In short, *Ozidi* takes its interest and dramatic impact from a mimesis not of historical but of spiritual experience.

In *The Raft* the actual and real world provides a dramatic basis for the spiritual: the physical isolation of the four men on the raft and the dangers of the river gradually pale against the spiritual struggle between Ibobo and Kengide, between fear and defiance In *Ozidi* metaphors of spiritual struggle exert a central force on the direction of the play In the denouement scene where Ozidi kills his *deus ex machina,* Oreame, and in so doing loses his powers, the dramatic contest is between the two zombie-like witches haggling over their price and their power. Ozidi is not important. He says nothing during the scene, then falls victim to the smallpox. The figures Cold, Headache, Spots, Fever, crowd in on him gloating at his vulnerability and his final sickness is appropriate to his lack of merely personal achievement in the play. Whereas he was a strong and peaceable man on his own, his dramatic context has singled him out to fulfill an almost impersonal role, that of the archetypal avenger of family honour His grandmother tells the Old Man of the Forest that Ozidi

Must go forth and scatter death among
His father's enemies

To this the Old Man replies:

It's a good son, for how else can
His father come home from company of
the castaway?

What emerges is that the play has a strong celebratory and ritual air. The younger Ozidi is the gods' favourite. He is chosen for an honourable task, "a son who Oyin Almighty/Herself is sending forth to put to right/This terrible wrong done to his father". He is "a good son" not because he chooses, like Hamlet, to avenge, but because he is chosen.

What pathos there is surrounds his mother, Orea, who insists on a lesser role for him and in doing so is guilty of self-pity Her final plea, "you cannot/Let this happen to me", breaks into an accusation of Ozidi's failure in familial duty, and her words are full of both love and self-love:

I am only a poor hen roosting
Here in a hut by a hearth at which only
one chicken
Nestles-my one child bigger than a crowd'
A child sees home his parents in the dusk
Of their lives, so should his in his own turn.
No such duties has my boy done.

She is asking for customary familial affection. What she fails to see, and this points up her self-pity and the honourable role her son has been chosen for, is that private affection has to be sublimated into something more public. It is easy to mistake her for a typical bereaved woman of Greek tragedy, but her egoism makes her far less noble, and is implicitly criticized by the celebratory air at the end.

It is Important to note that the audience, who mayor may not be the people of Warri, are asked to partake in the "festival" of Ozidi. The ritual at the start and end is an explicit movement into and out of an area of "play" coloured by Singing, music, procession, and dance The recognizable world of Nigeria, explicitly referred to by the Story-Teller, has something to celebrate in the saga of Ozidi. And as the play progresses from the scenes of treachery and death in Act One to the promise of a son and his fashioning in Act Two, there is little doubt that the young Ozidi is destined to playa Victorious role. When he provokes his enemies' Wives, he has a confident ritual deliberateness that is amusing rather than frightening because his final victory is assumed. The speeches of Oreame as she prepares Ozidi for his fight with Azezabife are counter pointed by the sounds of an orchestra "beating in the event of the day". Her prayer at the shrine followed by her ritual light beating of Ozidi With her fan are all part of the atmosphere of the deliberateness of success when Ozidi wins his first victory over Azezab1fe. A "great spontaneous cheer fills the air and the people pour into the square cheering and beside themselves with excitement"

Just as Kengide in *The Raft* asserts himself over the unknown by shouting at it, so the Story-Teller and the audience in *Ozidi* assert that the tragic overtones and possibilities count for nothing in comparison to the heroic example of Ozidi. Heroic is perhaps the wrong word, because OZid1, unlike Kengide, fights against nothing and risks nothing. He is the elected one. The audience rejoice that his example exists; and they ritualize it.

In the final analysis, the acting out of the various ritual scenes stamps the play With the awesome and joyous character of a ceremonial. It is Clark's first success in what he regards as the most promising area for dramatic Writing in Nigeria, "this composite art of the folk theatre", the combination of dance, music, ritual, and poetry. The shift from the first two plays is remarkable but not inconsistent. The lonely role of Ozidi, often facing the same chaos as Thobo and Kengide on their raft, is finally ameliorated. His cause is noble in the eyes of the audience and the audience share in Its celebratory quality. It is no answer for an individual like Zifa to walk away into the sea, or for the audience simply to watch Kengide's stirring defiance of the unknown. *Ozidi* is a play in which the audience must share.

The dramatist foregoes an individualistic interpretation of life for something more public: a dramatic manifestation of the community of Itself. Clark acknowledges this when he writes, "the very myths upon which many of these dramas are based, so beautiful ill themselves, serve to record the origins and *raison d' etre* of the institutions and peoples who own them". It would be intolerable if these were tragic. To respond to the role of Ozidi is to confirm the worth of his ordeal and to make of his example a living and joyous defiance of the spirit of evil.

Source: T. O. Mcloughlin, "The Plays of John Pepper Clark," in *English Studies in Africa,* Vol. is, 1975,pp 31-40.

Topics for Further Study

Research the geography of Nigeria, focusing on the Niger River and its delta. How important is the river in the country's economy? What natural phenomenon creates the situations discussed in the play?

Read and research Ijaw folklore. Ijaw folklore is native to the area Clark grew up in and greatly influenced IDS writing. Relate *The Raft* to your findings.

Compare and contrast *The Raft,* its characters, and situations with the existentialist play by Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1952). How do the authors handle similar themes?

Many critics have argued that *The Raft* is an allegory that reflects the political situation in Nigeria at the time. Research the political situation and come up with your own interpretation of the play's symbols and meanings.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: Nigeria is in a period of social, political, and economic instability after winning independence.

Today: Political, economic, and social instability still plague Nigeria.

1960s: Though there were elected officials in power through most of the decade, a 1966 military coup drastically affects the country's political structure.

Today: Though Nigeria began democratically electing officials in 1999, its first civilian ruler, President Olusegun Obasanjo, is a former military ruler.

1960s: The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 is but one chapter in the ongoing Cold War, a standoff between the United States and Soviet Union over nuclear weapons.

Today: While the Cold War has ended and many treaties are in place to limit nuclear arms, the threat of nuclear war remains real as many nations have acquired the ability to make or buy nuclear technology.

1960s: Though African Americans fight for and gain more civil rights by law, social changes are slower to take place. Many leaders in the movement, such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, lose their lives, leading to uncertainty about the future of the civil rights movement.

Today: Many gains have been made for African Americans in terms of civil rights. While social attitudes have progressed, many are unsure full equality will ever be achieved.

What Do I Read Next?

Song of a Goat (1961) is the first play in Clark's trilogy that includes *The Raft.* It is also set in the Niger Delta.

The Masquerade (1964) is the second play in Clark's trilogy that includes *The Raft.*

No Exit (1944), a play by Jean Paul Sartre, also concerns four characters stuck together in a small space facing the unknown.

The Sea at Dauphin (1954), a play by Derek Walcott, also concerns characters, in this case fishermen, facing loss of life because of the sea.

Further Study

Carley, Wilfred, *Whispers from a Continent The Literature of Contemporary Africa,* Vintage Books, 1969

This book discusses many African writers, including Clark, and offers extensive commentary on *The Raft*

and its companion plays in the trilogy.

Falola, Toyin, et al., *History of Nigeria* 3. *Nigeria in the Twentieth Century,* Longman, 1993.

This history text considers many aspects of Nigerian history as it evolved from a British colony to self-rule. Graham-White, Anthony, *The Drama of Black Africa,* Samuel French, 1974.

This nonfiction text analyzes several African playwrights, including Clark, and spends a chapter discussing how his plays compare to Greek tragedies.

Wren, Robert IN, *J P Clark,* Twayne Publishers, 1984.

This critical biography considers the whole of Clark's career, including his dramatic works and poetry.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) 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, DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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

DfS 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 Drama 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 DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS 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 Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama 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 DfS 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.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama 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 DfS, 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 Drama 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 DfS, 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 Drama 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:

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