

## DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN

### Student-generated Questions and Theses

#### Questions:

1. Whose story is this? Who is the "King's Horseman," Elesin or Olunde?
2. How do the women in this play shape and guide the play?
3. How does the story of the Not-I bird relate to the play as a whole?
4. When Jane and Olunde are discussing the "strange custom" of a chief committing suicide following the King's death and Jane questions Olunde regarding this "ritual suicide" Olunde responds:  
"Is that worse than mass suicide? Mrs. Pilkings, what do you call what those young men are sent to do by their generals in this war? Of course you have mastered the art of calling things by names which don't remotely describe them."  
Do you agree that war and this ritual are comparable? If not, why do you think some customs are accepted and others are not?
5. Nigeria is independent at the time of the play [DH: No, it isn't: it is independent when Wole Soyinka wrote this play, but not in the 1940s. Soyinka lived through the transition from colony to independent nation, which took place in the early 1960s. Think about how that difference functions, and how you might reconceptualize the following questions as a result:]  
In what ways, however, has their former colonization made the [maintenance of] Nigerian customs difficult? Is there hope for the future generation to retain Yoruba or Ibo customs?
6. How would this play be different if it was written in Kiswahili rather than English? Soyinka [himself] feels "no contradiction, no sense of guilt, in the fact that [he] write[s] and communicate[s] in English." However, some people would say that Soyinka is writing in the oppressor's language. Do you agree? If not, why? [DH: my added questions for the author of this question: now that you realize the playwright is male rather than female, what difference does that make, if any, to your response?]

#### Three theses:

1. Self-sacrifice is necessary to maintain the way of life. The captain of the ship that exploded showed the same courage and resolve that Elesin has at the beginning of the play. The sacrifice allows others to continue their lives unhindered. When Elesin does not die there is chaos as a result.
2. Sergeant Amusa does not fit into either the English or Yoruba culture. As such he receives no respect and his actions do not benefit either side.
3. The Bride as a symbol for life in death: as Elesin dies, the Bride must turn her mind to the unborn, as Iyalaja remarks.

### **Death and the King's Horseman, round two.**

Questions:

1. In Scene 5, when Elesin tells Pilkings, "The contempt of my own son rescued something of my shame at your hands... He will avenge my shame, white one. His spirit will destroy you and yours," is he speaking the prophetic truth? In what sense do Olunde's actions "destroy" the white man?
  2. What parallels are drawn between Christianity and the native religion? How is this done, and what should we learn from it?
  3. How does the emphasis on transition as paramount explain the internal logic of the local customs? Is this understanding what Pilkings so missed and misinterpreted?
  4. When Elesin says, "Who seeks not to be remembered? Memory is Master of Death, the chink in his armour of conceit," he is making a statement that explains much of his attitude towards his actions. How does this emphasis on both the memory and consequences of an action, as opposed to an emphasis simply on the action in and of itself, explain the emphasis on transition as the ultimate link?
  5. What is the significance of the metaphor of the plantain? (Eg. "The sap of the plantain never dries. You have seen the young shoot swelling even as the parent stalks begin to whiter.")
1. In the beginning when Elesin chose a new wife who was already betrothed to another man, there was talk of him being cursed by the dis-possessed husband. Could this have contributed to Elesin's downfall and drop from grace?

Two more theses:

2. The women of Death and the King's Horseman often act more sensibly than the men, with problems arising when the men do not take the women's advice.
3. People from different backgrounds often have varying beliefs regarding suicide, with some feeling it brings honor and others believing it is barbaric.