

Death & the King's Horseman

A Lesson for **IGCSE English Literature**

Edexcel 4ET1 and Cambridge 0475

Taughtly.co.uk

**Tutoring • Group Classes • Masterclasses
Courses • Teaching Resources**

Past questions

Past paper questions – 4ET1

Death and the King's Horseman, Wole Soyinka

EITHER

9 'Iyaloja is determined that things are carried out in accordance with Yoruba traditions.'

How is Iyaloja presented as a character who wants the right thing to be done in the play?

You must consider language, form and structure in your answer.

(Total for Question 9 = 30 marks)

OR

10 In what ways is the death ritual significant in *Death and the King's Horseman*?

You must consider language, form and structure in your answer.

(Total for Question 10 = 30 marks)

Past paper questions – 4ET1

Death and the King's Horseman, Wole Soyinka

EITHER

- 9** 'Despite living in the Yoruba community, Simon Pilkings only respects British law and order.'

In what ways is respect important in *Death and the King's Horseman*?

You must consider language, form and structure in your answer.

(Total for Question 9 = 30 marks)

OR

- 10** Discuss the presentation of **one** character you find interesting in the play.

You must consider language, form and structure in your answer.

(Total for Question 10 = 30 marks)

Past paper questions – 4ET1

Death and the King's Horseman, Wole Soyinka

EITHER

9 Iyaloja: 'Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn.'

Explore the idea of hope in the play.

You must consider language, form and structure in your answer.

(Total for Question 9 = 30 marks)

OR

10 How does Soyinka present the Praise-Singer in *Death and the King's Horseman*?

You must consider language, form and structure in your answer.

(Total for Question 10 = 30 marks)

Past paper questions – 0475

- To what extent does Soyinka make you dislike the British characters in the play?
- In what ways does Soyinka's portrayal of Olunde contribute to the play's dramatic impact?
- How far does Soyinka make Jane Pilkings a likeable character?
- Explore how Soyinka strikingly conveys the way Simon Pilkings thinks and feels about Yoruba customs.
- Explore two moments in the play which Soyinka makes particularly dramatic for you.
- How does Soyinka powerfully convey Olunde's thoughts and feelings about Yoruba traditions?

Essay structure

Option #1

- Introduction
- Beginning
- Middle
- Ending
- Conclusion

Option #2

- Introduction
- At first,
- Then,
- However,
- Conclusion

Option #3

- Introduction
- At first,
- Then,
- Ultimately,
- Conclusion

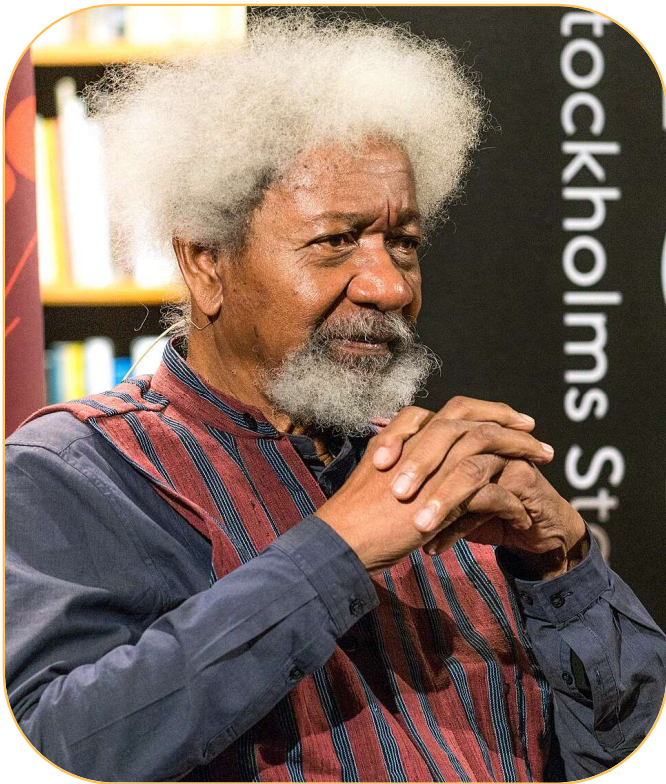
Context



Key context points:

- Soyinka's life
- Based on a true event
- Yoruba cosmic beliefs

Soyinka's life



By Frankie Fouganthin - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=159268320>

- Nigerian playwright, poet, and activist, born in 1934
- Deeply influenced by Yoruba traditions, mythology, and spiritual practices.
- Studied in Nigeria and the UK, combining African and Western literary traditions.
- Explores colonialism's cultural disruptions and spiritual consequences – grew up under British colonial rule
- Advocates for preserving indigenous practices amidst colonial influences.
- Won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986, first African laureate.
- Recently tore up American green card in protest against Trump

Based on a true event

- The story told in Death and the King's Horseman is based on an historical event:
- In 1946, a royal horseman called Elesin was duty-bound to commit the ritual suicide according to Yoruba custom
- This act was stopped by the British colonial powers, specifically by a British district officer much like the character of Simon Pilkings in the play

Yoruba beliefs

Three stages of being: unborn, living, ancestors

- All three stages are linked by a passage, abyss or transitional gulf. The three stages are connected and you can move between the stages, e.g. ancestors can return as the unborn, the unborn can refuse to be born if their parents are dishonourable.
- Elesin would keep this passageway open by committing ritual suicide
- By failing to do the ritual, he risks all three stages of existence
- Play opens with the stage direction, "a **passage** through the market"
- Not-I Bird: "watch me dance along the narrowing **path**"

Soyinka's intentions

Soyinka's intentions

- Soyinka aims to illustrate the catastrophic consequences of a leader's failure to fulfil his cultural duties, as seen through Elesin's tragic fall.
- Through the character of Elesin, Soyinka critiques the seductive nature of earthly pleasures that can corrupt one's will and sense of duty.
- Soyinka seeks to reclaim and celebrate Yoruba culture, challenging colonial narratives that devalue African traditions and beliefs.
- By depicting the intertwined nature of spirituality and politics, Soyinka emphasizes the complexity of human existence beyond simplistic good versus evil dichotomies.
- Through characters like Olunde, Soyinka explores the generational divide created by colonialism, highlighting the need for understanding and bridging cultural gaps.

Characters



Elesin Oba

- Tragic fall / Fatal flaw - loss of will
- Enjoys worldly pleasures: food, women, marketplace
- Gift for words and storytelling - like Soyinka himself
- Begins gregarious, colourful, larger than life; ends pitiful and disgraced
- Attachment to material pleasure can corrupt the will and endanger society
- No understanding of white man's colonial realm
- Blames his failure to commit ritual suicide on everyone else: new bride, Pilkings... but was really a failure of his own will
- Dies in shame, in both human realm and ancestral realm



Iyaloja

- "Mother" of the market: matriarch
- Wealthy, powerful woman
- Markets centre of earthly life
- Honour Elesin as the upholder of traditions and balance in the Yoruba world
- Warns Elesin of attachment to worldly things
- Nearest to Elesin's equal
- Elesin faces Iyaloja's scorn: she is the upholder of Yoruba values



Praise-Singer



- Member of Horseman's entourage
- Entertainer, oral historian and storyteller
- Joking friendship with Elesin, sharing humour and proverbs
- Begins by admires Elesin
- His job to help Elesin reach the trance to commit ritual suicide
- Like Iyaloja, warns Elesin of his weakness for earthly things, especially women
- After Elesin's failure, Praise-Singer speaks more in grief than anger - betrayed

Olunde

- Mouthpiece for Soyinka
- Represents younger generation who come into more contact with white colonials
- The divorce in understanding between young and older generations due to colonial interference Initially seems Olunde has turned his back on Yoruba world and accepted white values... he has used his time in Britain to further his understanding of the white race
- Similar journey to Soyinka - leaves Nigeria but remains deeply Yoruba
- Of all the characters, Olunde alone understands both British and Yoruba societies - acts as a bridge
- Doctor - attempts to heal sickness of society by giving his own life



Amusa

- Native Administration policeman - lowest rank of police
- Muslim: not Yoruba, not Christian. Outsider.
- Yet even his sense of sacred is outraged by the Egungun
- Source of humour and comic relief (e.g. market women scene)
- Inhabits neither Yoruba nor white world
- Sold manhood to serve the colonists



Joseph



- Pilkings' houseboy - always a boy - also symbolically lost his manhood in servitude
- Christian convert
- Christian beliefs far stronger than Pilkings'

Simon Pilkings



- British District Officer
- Represents typical colonial and expatriate
- Little interest in learning about Yoruba culture
- Shallow and conventional
- Little understanding of his own culture
- Mocks Christianity, paganism, Islam
- Learns nothing over the course of the play
- Utterly closed to new ideas

Jane Pilkings

- More sympathetic than her husband
- Urges compromise over upsetting Amusa and Joseph's religious beliefs
- Listens even if she learns little
- Equally bound by narrow values
- Doesn't even understand significance of her own story about the captain who sacrificed himself for the greater good of society



Tragedy



Features of tragedy

- Aristotle
- Tragic fall
- Hamartia
- Catharsis
- Chorus
- Western framework on African play

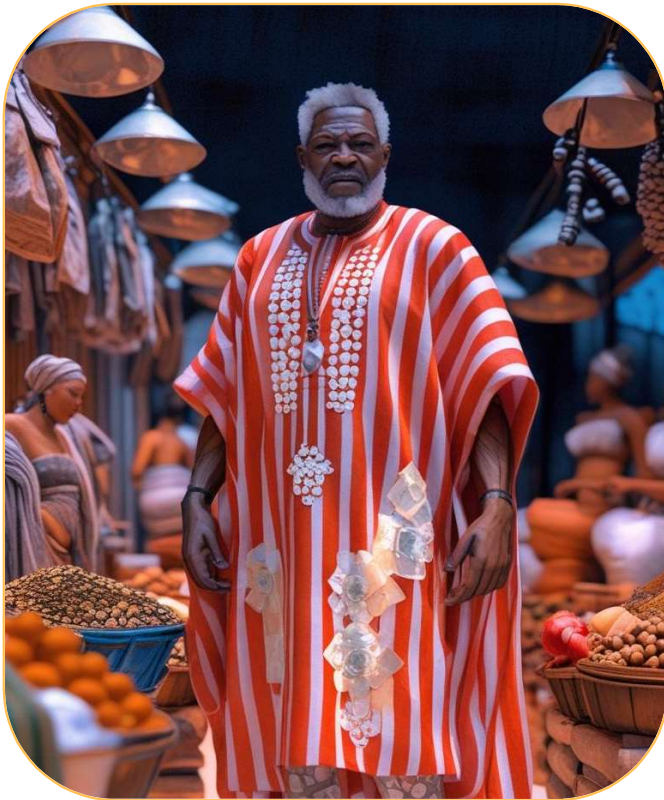
Aristotle



Aristotle outlined his theory of tragedy in his work *Poetics*, written around 335 BCE during ancient Greece's Classical period.

- Tragedy is an imitation of serious action with a profound moral or emotional impact.
- Catharsis: Tragedy aims to evoke pity and fear, purging these emotions in the audience.
- Hamartia: A protagonist's tragic flaw or error leads to their downfall.
- Unity: Tragedy emphasizes the unity of action, time, and place for dramatic cohesion.

Tragic fall



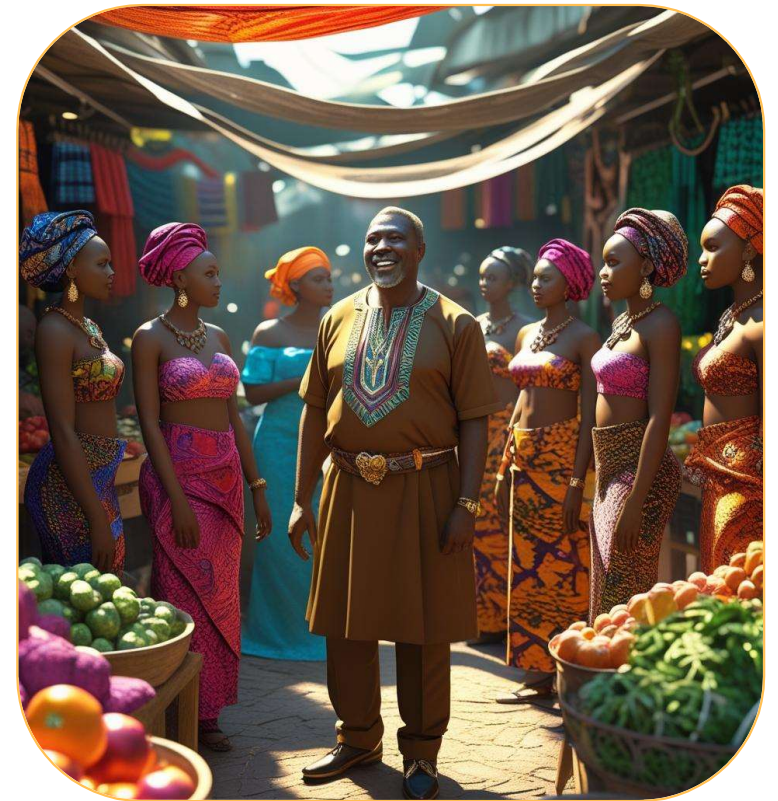
A tragic fall refers to the protagonist's descent from a position of honour or influence to one of failure or ruin, often due to a personal flaw (hamartia), fate, or external pressures.

- Elesin begins high status – honoured and loved by his people
- Falls to a state of disgrace – in chains, at the feet of his son, and called “an eater of leftovers”

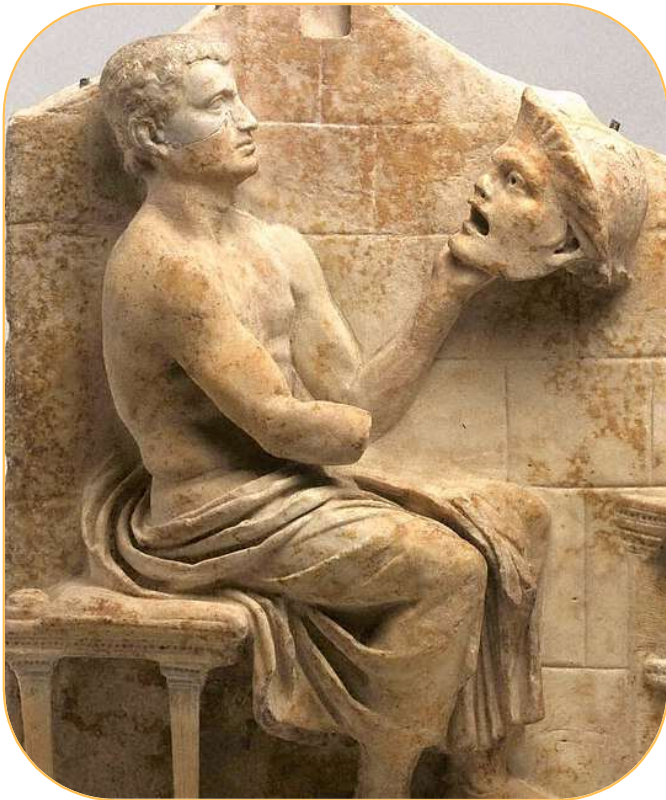
Hamartia

Hamartia means fatal flaw – a character's tragic flaw or error in judgment that leads to their downfall

- Elesin's fatal flaw is his failure of will
- A personal failure – NOT just result of colonist interference
- Hubris (arrogance and excessive pride) as he is overconfident he will commit the suicide – doesn't heed warnings of Iyaloja and Praise-Singer



Catharsis

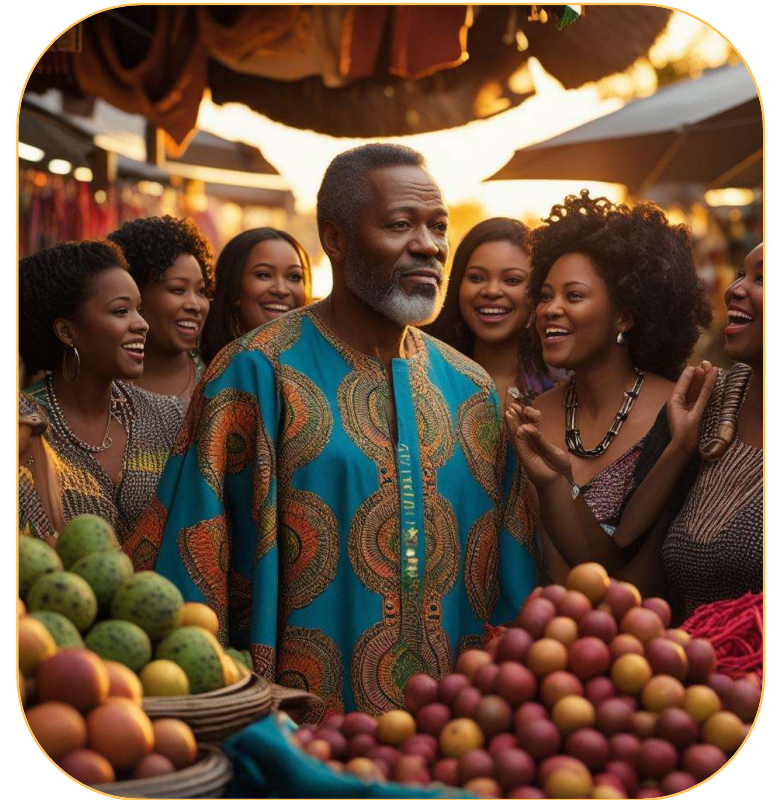


Catharsis is the emotional purging experienced by the audience. Through pity for the protagonist's suffering and fear of their potential fate, the audience achieves a sense of emotional release and moral reflection.

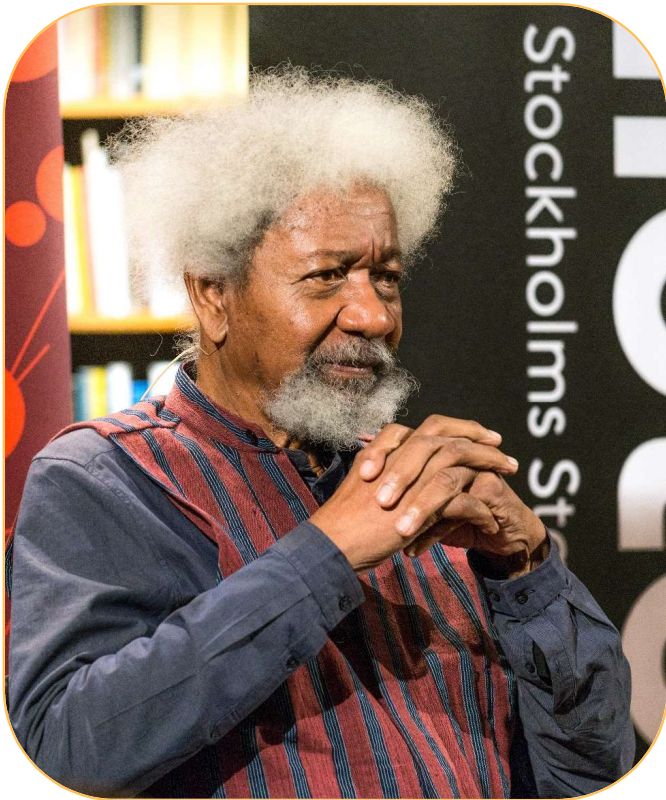
- Pity and fear for Elesin who fails to fulfil the ritual suicide
- Olunde's suicide and Elesin's later suicide seek to restore the natural order
- Causes reflection on importance of honouring your duties – especially those in power

Community as a Greek chorus

- In Greek plays, the chorus provides commentary, reflects societal values, and enhances the emotional atmosphere of the play.
- The community serves as a reflection of societal norms, reacting with approval or disapproval, thus offering insight into the consequences of Elesin's actions on the social and spiritual fabric of the group.



Western framework on African play



- Remember – we are applying Western literary theory to an African play
- However, Soyinka studied English Literature at University of Leeds and worked at Royal Court Theatre in London – certainly would have been familiar with Aristotle

Themes



Analysing themes

- Significant individual
- Duty and will
- Power and corruption as a political metaphor
- Spirituality and politics
- Reclaiming history and culture
- Women and power
- More than a clash of cultures

The significant individual



- Soyinka believes certain people have special roles and duties in the world
- Leaders of the people
- Make sacrifices for their communities
- This play explores what happens when a great leader fails his duty to his people
- This failure throws into danger not just the man, but the whole of Yoruba society, in this life and the afterlife
- Elesin's betrayal is catastrophic to whole world

Duty and will

- Those who follow their duty maintain a harmonious balance in the world, e.g. Olunde and the bride
- Elesin's blessed life comes on the promise he will one day sacrifice himself - women, food, riches. Failure to do this is a betrayal of trust.
- For Soyinka, it is the exercise of our will that makes us more than animals; if a man can assert his will then he can control his destiny
- Elesin's failure had nothing to do with the forces of colonialism but a failure of his own will because he was too enticed by earthly pleasures



Power and corruption



- Elesin isn't totally corrupted by his power or become too greedy
- He enjoys a hedonistic life and a love of women
- But becomes complacent and hubristic (too proud, arrogant)
- A life of flattery, honour and love from his people have made Elesin over-confident and not aware of the risk of his will failing
- Rejects Praise-Singer's help and Iyaloja's warnings
- After Nigeria's Civil War in the 1960s, Soyinka warns leaders to beware of losing their way, of forgetting their primary role as servants to their communities and being seduced by the attractions of wealth, lust and power

Spirituality and politics

- The Yoruba don't view life in dualist terms: one thing is good, one thing is bad
- View life as being more complex
- All aspects of life are related to each other
- Political and the spiritual are intertwined
- Therefore Elesin's failure affects everyone - all interrelated
- But Soyinka encourages the audience not to oversimplify the play: not just a clash of cultures, not simply good and evil, the events are more complex to analyse



Reclaiming history and culture



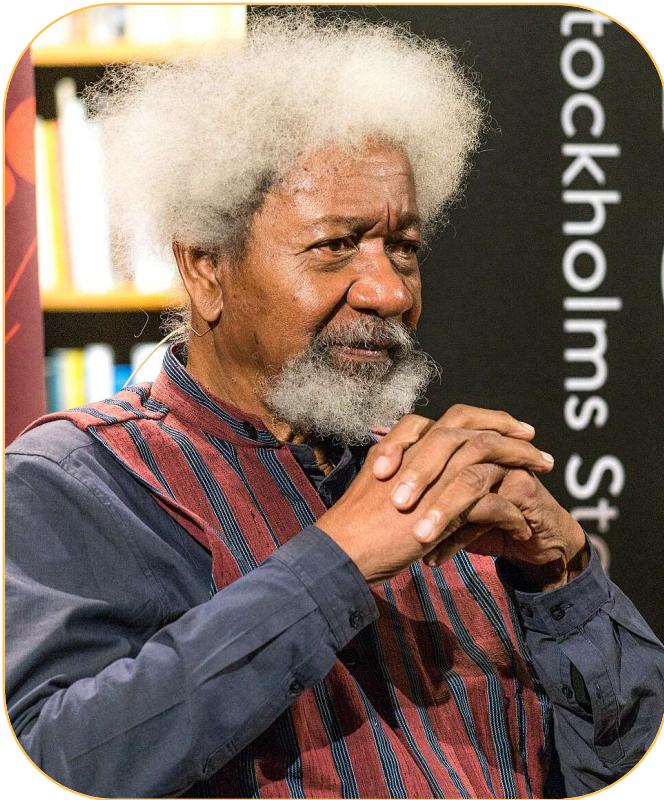
- During the colonial period, colonists ridiculed, devalued and dismissed African cultures, claiming Africa had no culture
- They believed they had to "civilise" black people, often through missionary schools or enforcing religion
- As a result of absorbing Western propaganda and mockery, some educated Africans became ashamed of indigenous forms of religion, marriage, music, dress, etc
- After colonisation, Africans tried to reclaim their lost culture and arts
- Soyinka shows Yoruba culture as rich and vibrant, blending idiom, song, dance, drums, parables together to honour Yoruba's past

Women and power

- **Women as cultural interpreters:** They help others understand cultural significance, like Jane with Yoruba beliefs.
- **Iyaloja's authority:** She questions Elesin's intentions, ensuring traditions are upheld for societal benefit.
- **Power of speech:** Women influence through words, not actions, guiding societal understanding.
- **Market girls' resistance:** They prevent Amusa from disrupting rituals, showing loyalty to Yoruba culture.
- **Jane's limited influence:** Attempts to guide Pilkings, but lacks power to change his behaviour.
- **Bride's subtle power:** Elesin is captivated by the bride's beauty, showing non-traditional influence.



More than a clash of cultures



- Soyinka himself warns about simplifying or misreading this play as a clash of cultures
- Says events in the play would have unfolded the same way without colonialists
- Due to Elesin's lack of will – colonialist interference only allowed a pause
- Nonetheless, can still analyse theme of clash of cultures, but be wary of reducing your analysis to **only** this

Language



Features of language

- Yoruba poetic language and idiom
- Metaphor
- Use of Yoruba language
- Rhythmic and poetic free verse
- Folktales and storytelling
- Colonialists' thin, slangy English
- Mimicry
- Pidgin English

Yoruba poetic language and idiom

Traditional Yoruba people use weighty poetic language rich in proverbs, typical of many African languages

- “When the moment comes, don’t turn the food to rodents’ droppings in their mouth. Don’t let them taste the ashes of the world” – Iyaloja, Act 1
- “Then tell him to leave this market. This is the home of our mothers. We don't want the eater of white left-overs at the feast their hands have prepared” – Girl to Amusa, Act 3

Metaphor

Iyaloja uses metaphor to explain how Elesin has disrupted the natural order in the universe

- “The sap in the plantain does not dry.”
- “Elesin, even at the narrow end of the passage I know you will look back and sigh a last regret for the flesh that flashed past your spirit in flight.”

Use of Yoruba language

Use of Yoruba words and occasional full lines are embedded deeply in the play, even full songs in the Yoruba language

Reclaiming and honouring Yoruba culture in a post colonialist era

- E.g. the play's opening and first lines of dialogue are, "Elesin O! Elesin Oba! Howu!" meaning how/why
- E.g. Elesin calling the Praise-Singer "Olohun-iyo", meaning praise singer in Yoruba, or "sweet-voiced person"
- "Elesin-Oba" – "Oba" means Chief

Rhythmic and poetic free verse

Poetic and rhythmic free verse mirrors this musicality seen in Yoruba culture

In Western theatre, free verse is associated with intelligent, high-status characters. Note that the colonisers never speak using free verse.

- E.g. Elesin's Not-I Bird speech is told all in rhythmic free verse

I, when that Not-I bird perched
Upon my roof, bade him seek his nest again,
Safe, without care or fear. I unrolled
My welcome mat for him to see. Not-I
Flew happily away, you'll hear his voice
No more in this lifetime — You all know
What I am.

Folktales and storytelling



African literature and theatre was told in the oral tradition – passed verbally from person to person

Folktales and storytelling are present throughout, paying respects to Africa's oral tradition of storytelling, such as the **Not-I Bird** story Elesin tells

In this way, Soyinka honours the Yoruba and African traditions, reviving African literature and paying homage to the past

Colonialists' thin slangy English

Contrasting to the Yoruba's poetic language dense with imagery and metaphor, the colonials' English is thin, slangy English

Shows a lack of roots in history, culture or poetry as the Yoruba's English does

- "I think you've shocked his big pagan heart bless him." Jane, Act 2
- "Damn it, what a confounded nuisance!" Pilkings, Act 2



Mimicry

Mimicry means copying someone to mock them

Shallow use of English is mocked when the girls parody European manners and speech in mimicry... as well as their shallow, frivolous, meaningless concerns

- What's your handicap old chap?
- Is there racing by golly?
- Splendid golf course, you'll like it.
- I'm beginning to like it already.
- And a European club, exclusive.
- You've kept the flag flying.
- We do our best for the old country.
- It's a pleasure to serve.
- Another whisky old chap?
- You are indeed too too kind.
- Not at all sir. Where is that boy?

Pidgin English

Pidgin English is a simplified form of English mixed with elements of local languages, often used as a means of communication between people who do not share a common language.

Amusa speaks Pidgin English, the English of the common man in Nigeria.

This language separates Amusa from the other characters in the play as an outsider and emphasises his comedic status.

- “That egungun itself, I no touch. And I no abuse ‘am. I arrest ring leader but I treat egungun with respect.” Amusa, Act 2
- “We dey go now, but make you no say we no warn you.” Amusa, Act 3

Form and structure

Form & structure:

- Songs and music
- Costume
- Combining Western and African literary traditions
- Circular structure of the ritual suicide
- Irony and foreshadowing

Songs and music



- Music is almost always present in the play, with drums, singing and the dirge of the women throughout the whole of Scene 5, enriching our understanding of this world and bringing Yoruba culture to life
- The songs give a sense of Yoruba's land and voice being alive throughout the play
- By contrast, colonists' music is "played badly" or on a "gramophone"
- This shows the colonials are cut off from their own culture

Costume

- Illustrates cultural misunderstandings and disrespect between the British colonizers and the Yoruba people.
- The egungun costumes, which Pilkings and his wife Jane wear, are sacred in Yoruba culture. Used in rituals to communicate with the spirits of ancestors, symbolising a deep connection to the spiritual world.
- The British characters, particularly Pilkings, demonstrate a lack of respect and understanding for these cultural symbols.
- Pilkings views the egungun costumes merely as attire for a costume party, disregard for their spiritual significance.
- Exploitative and disrespectful



Combining Western and African traditions



- Features of Aristotle's theory of tragedy: tragic fall, hamartia, catharsis
- Features of Ancient Greek tragedy: community as a chorus
- ...And the three unities: unity of time, place and plot
- Combined with African oral tradition, music, drums, dancing, disrespected and mocked by invading colonists who claimed "Africa had no culture"

Circular structure

- Play begins with discussing the upcoming ritual suicide of Elesin
- Play ends with the completion of the ritual suicide by his son, Olunde
- Suggests a sense of completion, wholeness
- Restoration of the Yoruba three states of being



Irony and foreshadowing



- Elesin's initial confidence and his eventual failure, despite warnings of Praise Singer and Iyaloja
- Pilkings' ignorance about the Yoruba custom of ritual suicide, calling it "savage" and "barbaric" and yet the audience can see the depth of the Yoruba belief system – and shallowness of Pilkings in his own religion/beliefs
- Olunde is strong in his beliefs of duty and customs – ironic as Pilkings believe he's been Westernised – yet he has a greater commitment than even Elesin

Symbols & motifs

Symbols and motifs

- Egungun costume
- The marketplace
- Nature imagery
- Slavery imagery

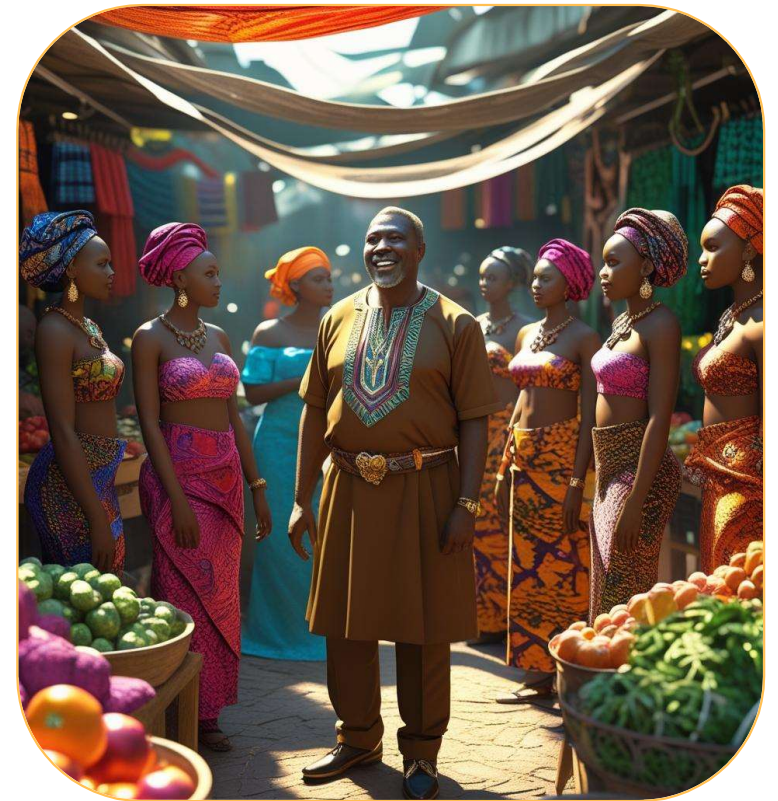
Egungun costume



- As previously stated, a symbol of Pilkings' ignorance of Yoruba culture
- "That egungun itself, I no touch. And I no abuse 'am. I arrest ring leader but I treat egungun with respect." Amusa, Act 2

The marketplace

- A symbol of the vitality of life
- Market as a metaphor for the centre of the world, where everything happens - microcosm (a mini society)
- Foreshadows Elesin's love of earthly pleasures
- Yoruba saying, "The world is a market place; heaven is home."
- Apart from its obvious economic importance, the market occupies a signal cultural, political, and spiritual position in the Yoruba cosmos.



Nature imagery



- Emphasises Yoruba people's close bond with nature
- Disruption to the natural order when colonialists interfere with ritual suicide
- Elesin compared to a "cockerel" at start of Act 1
- "This market is my roost. When I come among the women I am a chicken with a hundred mothers" Elesin, Act 1

Slavery imagery

Elesin and his culture are still at the mercy of a system that seeks to dehumanise African people and deprive them of their traditions

Legacy of colonialism in Nigeria

- Elesin is jailed “where the slaves were stored”
- “His wrists are encased in thick iron bracelets, chained together; he stands against the bars, looking out.”



Key quotations

Key quotations

“Life is honour. It ends when honour ends” – Elesin, Act 1

“When the moment comes, don’t turn the food to rodents’ droppings in their mouth. Don’t let them taste the ashes of the world” – Iyaloja, Act 1

“If they want to throw themselves off the top of a cliff or poison themselves for the sake of some barbaric custom what is that to me?” – Simon Pilkings, Act 2

“You who play with strangers’ lives, who even usurp the vestments of our dead, yet believe that the stain of death will not cling to you” – Iyaloja, Act 5

“Look, just when did you become a social anthropologist, that's what I'd like to know” – Simon Pilkings, Act 2

Key quotations

“I know it was this thought that killed me, sapped my powers and turned me into an infant in the hands of unnamable strangers” – Elesin, Act 5

“Nonsense, he's a Moslem. Come on, Amusa, you don't believe in all this nonsense do you? I thought you were a good Moslem” – Simon Pilkings, Act 2

“And not merely my life but the lives of many” – Elesin, Act 5

“I no like trouble but duty is duty” – Amusa, Act 3

“Well, I did my duty as I saw it. I have no regrets” – Simon Pilkings, Act 5

“Then tell him to leave this market. This is the home of our mothers. We don't want the eater of white left-overs at the feast their hands have prepared” – Girl, Act 3

“I have no father, eater of left-overs.”
Olunde, Act 5

More resources

Vocabulary

Procrastination	Gregarious	Colonial interference	Bridge between cultures	Earthly pleasures
Attachment to material pleasure	Soyinka's mouthpiece	Comic relief	Lost manhood	Reclaiming history
Shallow and conventional	Upholder of Yoruba values	Post colonial critique	Christian convert	Shallow understanding
Absorbing Western propaganda	Narrow values	Cultural appropriation	Moral ambiguity	Cross-cultural understanding
Interrelated	Complacent and hubristic	Existential threat	Yoruba worldview	Universal message

Taughtly.co.uk

- Free video lessons and quizzes
- Free teaching resources
- IGCSE and IB courses

Tutoring

Register your interest:

- Self-formed group classes
- Masterclasses
- One-to-one tutoring

