Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Death and the King's Horseman

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Plot

- Oyo, a Yoruba town in Nigeria, during the Second World War, under British colonial rule. The King has died, and by tradition his Horseman, Elesin, must die too, by **ritual suicide**, to lead the King's spirit into the world of the ancestors.
- On the day of his death, Elesin enjoys his last hours in the market. He sees a beautiful young woman and insists on marrying her, though she is engaged to Iyaloja's son. Iyaloja, the leader of the market women, agrees.
- The British District Officer, Simon Pilkings, and his wife Jane are dressed for a masked ball in sacred **egungun** costumes taken from local people. Learning of the ritual, Pilkings has Elesin arrested to stop him dying.
- Elesin's son Olunde, who has been studying medicine in England, returns for his father's burial. When the ritual fails, he kills himself in his father's place. Faced with his son's body, Elesin strangles himself with his chains, too late. Iyaloja condemns both Elesin and the British.

Characters

- Elesin: proud, charming and full of life; his love of the world makes him delay his duty, and his failure is his **tragedy**.
- Olunde: educated in England but loyal to his people; he understands both cultures and chooses duty.
- Iyaloja: the strong voice of the community, who holds Elesin to account. The **Praise-Singer**: honours and warns Elesin.
- Simon and Jane Pilkings: well-meaning in their own eyes but ignorant and disrespectful of Yoruba belief. Sergeant Amusa, a Muslim convert in the colonial police, is caught between the two worlds.

Themes and context

- Duty and honour, the link between the living, the dead and the unborn, the community, sacrifice, weakness and the pull of life, and **colonialism**.
- Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian writer who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1986, based the play on events in Oyo in 1946. He wrote it in 1975.
- In a note to the play, Soyinka warns against reading it simply as a "clash of cultures": its heart is the Yoruba world and Elesin's failure of will.

Form and language

- A **tragedy** in five scenes, moving between the market and the colonial world.
- Yoruba scenes use poetry, proverbs, music, drumming and dance; the British scenes use flat, everyday English prose, showing the contrast between the two worlds.

Key terms

Ritual suicide	A death carried out as a sacred duty, according to tradition.
Egungun	A Yoruba masquerade costume linked with the spirits of the ancestors.
Colonialism	One country controlling another and its people.
Tragedy	A play in which a great character's failure leads to their downfall.
Praise-singer	A poet who praises and advises a leader in Yoruba tradition.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Where is Death and the King's Horseman set?
2. What must Elesin do after the King dies?
3. Who is Iyaloja?
4. What are the Pilkingses wearing for the ball?
5. Why does Pilkings arrest Elesin?
6. What has Olunde been studying in England?
7. What does Olunde do when the ritual fails?
8. How does Elesin die?

Answers

1. Oyo, in Nigeria
2. Die by ritual suicide to lead the King's spirit
3. The leader of the market women

Your notes

4. Sacred egungun costumes
5. To stop the ritual death
6. Medicine
7. Kills himself in his father's place
8. He strangles himself with his chains

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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