

Death and the king's horseman act 1 analysis

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Act 1: Analysis Death and the King's Horseman is set in the Yoruban village of Oyo in Western Nigeria during World War II. Scene One opens at the bustling marketplace; this immediately festive scene establishes the marketplace as the site of not just commerce but also community and even kinship. The market women have a "Mother," Iyaloja, and Elesin refers to all the women of the market as his mothers. In this scene, Elesin's reputation as a great and honorable man is revealed, and his immediate future is gradually unfolded.

The word "Elesin" means "horseman," and "Oba" means "king"—for Elesin Oba, the horseman of the king, his royal title is also his name.

He derives his identity from his important cultural role. The king has died, and it is the Elesin's duty to follow the king in death to the world of the ancestors. The play begins on the day that Elesin is to die. He visits the market because it provides him familiarity and comfort. His character is robust, entertaining, magisterial, and not lacking a certain degree of arrogance.

All the women treat him with great respect bordering on fear, as Elesin is followed about by men employed solely in making music and singing his praises. His role as king's horseman has such importance to the community that everyone views him as a sort of hero; Elesin is told repeatedly that the world is in his hands, and he replies that he was born to maintain the world as everyone knows it. Elesin is also shown to be quite clever, as demonstrated in the complicated story of the Not-I bird, as well as in his reasoning for why he should be allowed to "marry" the beautiful girl on such an important night.

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It is clear that he feels lust for the girl, but he rationalizes this by explaining that sleeping with her will allow him to unburden himself of unnecessary seed and, at the same time, benefit the community by impregnating the girl and leaving behind more progeny. This scene introduces one of the central motifs of the play: the metaphysical conflict between the individual and the community, between private desires and public duty. The community depends upon Elesin to fulfill his cultural obligations as the king's horseman in order to keep their world in balance.

The Elesin's self-sacrifice will bring into proper balance the three levels of existence in traditional Yoruban cosmology: the worlds of the living, the ancestors, and the not-yet born. The Elesin's death will ensure harmony among these three worlds; thus, the ritual suicide has a regenerative function in maintaining the community. This public duty comes into conflict with the Elesin's private desire to sleep with the beautiful girl, for Elesin's character is also established as lusty and enjoying the pleasures of life.

This scene contains two crucial moments of foreshadowing. Foreshadowing is when something happens that prepares the reader for some future action or event in the play. The first is when the Praise Singer warns the king's horseman that he must be careful around women for they can ruin (weaken) a man by spoiling him.

This warning seems to indicate that Elesin's distraction—his desire to “marry” the beautiful girl—might disrupt the ritual he plans to participate in later that evening.

Similarly, Iyaloja warns Elesin not to commit any last actions that will cause him to lose his honor or be remembered badly by the living. This warning hints that all will not go as smoothly as planned with the evening's important ritual. These two moments of foreshadowing suggest that Elesin's "restless" and roving eyes, his attraction to women, may turn out to be not only his personal downfall (the loss of honor and esteem) but also the downfall of the entire community (the upsetting of the delicate balance among the worlds of the living, dead, and unborn).