

The dark vessel:
laye's use of his
protagonist-narrator
to connect to western
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Camara Laye's demonstrative narrative *The Dark Child* delineates the author's childhood and adolescence in colonial Upper Guinea in the early twentieth century. Simple in construction, the story gives emotional value to the experiences common among young boys of Laye's social class as well as to those specific to his family. Laye's pointedly detailed depictions of traditional village life and belief systems focus on maturation, specifically that of a young boy reaching manhood during a time of profound historical transition. Laye portrays his growth under strong, ancient Malinké values yet also within the contexts of colonial oppression and degradation in a deceptively innocent way, including subtle yet important reflections upon his youth from the perspective of an adult since removed from that culture. This marks the author's purpose to emphasize the life-changing culture clash that occurred throughout West Africa. Laye's subtle, indirect references to colonization and the sometimes troubling amalgamation of the Western and West African civilizations speaks to the non-African audience both as a mockery and as an educational tool, while his poignant remembered thoughts and emotions relate to all his readers on a more human level. In these ways, Laye searches to reach a level of understanding with his Western audience that is both academic and empathetic.

Much of Laye's narrative gives thorough, straightforward depictions of the life processes important to both his strong culture and to himself, using them to give worth to the judgmental colonial eye. Laye explains in chapter seven, for example, his introduction to the society of the uninitiated, a significant rite of passage that, on its surface, represents nothing similar in European coming-of-age. Instead of explicitly stating the inherent, profound effect this

experience had on his perception of his culture and of his transformation into adulthood, Laye gives a meaningful depiction of his childhood emotions throughout the ceremony: " Even though (the tom-tom) was being played in a remote part of the concession, its notes had roused me at once, had struck my breast, had struck right at my heart, just as if Kodoké, our best player, had been played for me alone" (93-94.) This description, drawing a connection from the simplicity of a drum beating to one of the most famously important organs, the human heart, implicitly demonstrates the enormously powerful connotations this ceremony held for Laye. Laye assumes the narrow-mindedness of his Western readers with regard to the weight of such a described initiation, and thus takes into account the culture gap at the root of his audience's " ignorance." He attempts to rub the edge off this hostile social differentiation by carefully, vividly and explicitly painting a portrait of a time in which he felt his life held worth, even as colonizers tried to prove otherwise.

At the same time, Laye compels his audience to become aware of the subtle influences of colonialism as they wreak quiet havoc on these age- old, culture- defining traditions. Explains Kendra L. Matko of the Colonial and Postcolonial Studies program at Western Michigan University, " Nowhere in (Laye's) autobiography do we see evidence of the primitive, dark, " uncivilized" culture of Africa as depicted in classic colonial works like Conrad's Heart of Darkness, but instead encounter a quiet, solid, emotionally-scaffolded narrative, in the context of sophisticated nonfiction that calmly relays milestones in the author's childhood and young adult experience." As much as the Malinké society struggles to uphold certain

strong customs, especially the male initiation ceremony, the toxic influence of colonialism manifests itself in the smaller actions and thoughts of the community members. Throughout the novel, Laye uses his mother as a symbol of the maintenance of cultural values; returning to her represents a return to tradition and youth. Laye recalls his internal battle following the initiation ritual, in which he knows he must enter adulthood with poise yet still feels inclined to stay with his mother. Later in the novel, when Laye must decide whether or not to leave home for Paris, his main reservation rests in leaving behind his mother, the foundation of his roots. Yet ironically, Laye's mother does at times submit to the colonized mentality. When Laye returns home after attending school in the bigger, more industrialized city of Conkary, his mother has modernized his room to fit the European style she thinks her son expects and favors. "Originally (the hut) had been like the other huts, but gradually it began to acquire a European look. I say 'began to,' for the resemblance was never exact. Yet I was keenly aware of the changes, not only because they made the hut more comfortable, but even more because they were tangible proof of how much my mother loved me" (169.) While naturally Laye's maternal instinct mandates that she put her son above all other concerns, this stark shift in the direction of embodying a colonial lifestyle demonstrates the infusion of the this lifestyle into the most devout keepers of tradition. Here, Laye also hints at his own assimilation into Europeanism, when he refers to the Western style of his hut as "more comfortable." This quieter demonstration of cultural deterioration in light of the rise of colonial powers shows to the Western audience the extent of European clout. Laye exemplifies this through his own family's subconscious submission to these influences, appealing to the readers' understanding of <https://assignbuster.com/the-dark-vessel-layes-use-of-his-protagonist-narrator-to-connect-to-western-audiences/>

the family as an important institution and in this way teaching the realism of British domination in softer, more widely- accessible terms.

In order to appeal to his audience's pathos, Laye includes within his narrative aspects relatable to all his readers based on their common connection to the human race. Later in his portrait of his entrance into the society of the uninitiated, Laye paints more distinctively the natural childish feelings wrapped up in the process, and it is the way in which Laye keenly remembers his great fear that he establishes a connection to all his readers. Purposely left in the dark about the nature of the ceremony, Laye describes his trepidation in engaging in the activity, cowering at the loud, unknown sounds and their mysterious source. Added to his inherent fear of the unknown was the fear he felt stemming from the pressure to keep the bravery and composure of an adult man, traits holding ingrained significance: " I wasn't to show fright or to run off and hide. Still less was I to resist or cry out when my elders carried me off" (96.) Laye's description of his somewhat ironic heightened fear at a time when society mandates that he suppress this fear communicates an assumed sense of understanding on the part of the reader. Here, Laye expects the reader to relate to his fright, so profound that he could relay it in its natural, uncensored form decades and several life experiences later. Laye's more refined method of connecting to his readers here has been criticized by some, claiming that the author neglects to portray the harshest of realities and thereby distorts the brutality of the period for the colonized peoples. States Petri Liukkonen, of the Finnish literary review website Kirjasto, " Laye's idyllic portrayal of the daily life of an African child was not accepted by politically oriented critics, who saw that is

refused to confront the problem of Africa's collision with Europe. The Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe considered the book 'too sweet' for his taste. Thomas Lask in The New York Times saw that it was a 'tender re-creation of African life, mysterious in detail but haunting and desirable in spirit.'" The latter review speaks to Laye's clear attempt to relate to his readers psychologically through his description of some of his most troubling yet relatable apprehensions.

Childhood fear remains a common and unavoidable concept for all people, and Laye's detailed articulation of his own experience with fear of the unknown helps transcend the major culture gap between author and reader.

Laye's ability to break down his coming-of-age experiences in colonized West Africa shows the value the author holds in imparting these experiences to the naïve reader. Laye puts emotionally-charged, complicated situations and events in simple terms so as to most powerfully reach his target audience. However, Laye's deliberate incorporation of the aspects of his life that relate most notably to every reader speaks in an even greater way to Laye's mission to create an informative, educational, and even attainable narrative that seeks to broaden general understanding of not only his own life, but the one lived by many Africans on different levels.