

Duty and culture dichotomy in death and the king's horseman

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Death and the King's Horseman

Death and The King's Horseman is a tragedy in 5 acts. During this whole play, we as the readers get to see the struggles Elesin Oba experiences while deciding whether to comply and go through with the ritual suicide or stray on Earth and enjoy his earthly desires. This work demonstrates and focuses on Soyinka's culture and provides us with some of the constant arguments and misunderstandings in his culture. As we look through this work we can see several themes and personal roles of the other characters to add to his main purpose for the novel as a reference to duty, not culture.

When one looks at the Death and King's Horseman within its contexts, it would appear that the 1967-1969 Nigerian Civil war had obviously scarred the author to the point of producing this work. Elesin in a sense is Soyinka, since both men had to exercise tremendous acts of will to decide whether to follow their tradition or oppose it, and since the novel is centered around a disastrous time the style must be dramatic. When our tale begins Elesin clearly believes he is the hot topic of the town. He gets puffed up about his crucial role in the tradition that revolves around the king's death. He expresses this clearly by saying, " My rein is loosened. I am master of my fate. When the hour comes watch me dance along the narrowing path Glazed by the soles of my great precursors My soul is eager. I shall not turn aside." (1. 36) Elesin is not shy about his role and as we analyze the passage we see his ego on full view. The author presents and ends the dramatics with our main protagonist Elesin Oba.

The tone of this novel seems very dark because the story begins with the death of the King and then preserves to get darker when the suicide ritual is interrupted. In the novel Soyinka manages to incorporate death and a bit of “dry” humor, for example, in the text Simon asks Elsin for his “word of honor” that he won’t try anything “foolish” when the market women (Iyaloja) comes to visit him in prison. His response to this is, “Honour? White one, did you say you wanted my word of honour?” Simon still asks for his compliance, but as we all know Elsin isn’t just going to take anything from anyone, so his next statement proves my point,” But I am sure you have searched her clothing as you would never dare touch your own mother. And there are these two lizards of yours who roll their eyes even when I scratch” (5. 65-68). Now we wouldn’t say these comments are funny, no, they are quite witty. Elsin may be bound by chains but he is still quick in his thinking.

In conclusion, I learned from reading this tale is that every culture has an ultimate social issue whether that be a ritual tradition or texting and driving. Even though we see this novel as a clash of cultures, it’s not. Elsin has failed in the end to perform his duty, and his failure has cosmic significant problems which leaves his newly wedded wife to bear the burden of his shame and know that in the end the man she put on a pedestal is in fact just a regular man who made the same mistake all tragic heroes make, which is his greed for his desires.