

# Yoruba values and paradoxes in death and the king's horseman

[Literature](#)



Throughout the play, *Death and the King's Horseman*, by Wole Soyinka, there is a conspicuous paradox between the traditional Yoruba values of Olunde and his father, Elesin. Although Olunde has been westernized by staying in Europe for his studies, he is seen to be more faithful to his own culture than his father, who has never ventured off from the roots of his civilization. Olunde's devotion to his culture overcomes his father's through a prolonged sacrifice ritual. Through Elesin's failure to follow through with the sacrifice, there is an abundance of European influence, shame, and cultural values that enforce Olunde's actions. This further strengthens the paradox seen in this play and focuses on clues drawn out by the play itself.

Olunde spends some time away in Europe to further his education in medicine. When he arrives back to his hometown, he converses with Mr. Pilkings' wife, Jane. In their conversation they mention a captain who had to take his own life when his ship was blown up in order to save the lives of others. Jane expresses her opinion when she says, "...Life should never be thrown deliberately away"(Soyinka, 42). Jane, like other Europeans, does not understand that sacrificial ritual in many cultures is an action of honor. We see this difference through Olunde saying, " I don't find it morbid at all. I find it rather inspiring. It is an affirmative commentary on life"(Soyinka, 42). Similarly, the traditional Yoruba values include a sacrificial ritual, which is why Olunde finds the captain's sacrifice so inspiring. Olunde is able to relate to the captain and realizes his honorability, in which he would perceive his father if he forewent his Yoruba duties. This story of the captain sacrificing his life for the wellbeing of others foreshadows the upcoming sacrifice Olunde later does.

Throughout Olunde's stay in Europe he was exposed to differences of people and culture, even surroundings such as World War II. Olunde unveils his opinion to Jane when he states, " Don't think it was just the war. Before that even started I had plenty of time to study your people. I saw nothing, finally, that gave you the right to pass judgement on other peoples and their ways. Nothing at all"(Soyinka, 44). Through Olunde's experiences with the European people he has been further educated in how single-minded individuals like Jane and her culture can be. In the text, Jane states that when Olunde left, her and her husband were unsure of what he left with. Olunde responds saying, " Neither did I. But I found out over there. I am grateful for your country for that. And I will never give it up"(Soyina, 44). Through Olunde's experiences, he has come to know that he will always be tied back to his roots no matter how long he is gone.

Elesin, the King's Chief Horseman, has a duty to fulfill in which he needs to accompany the King to the afterlife through a ritual sacrifice. Elesin makes excuses for his inaction by stating, "...my weakness came not merely from the abomination of the white man who came violently into my fading presence, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs"(Soyinka, 53). Elesin is trying to hide his true intentions, which was avoiding the sacrificial ritual he was supposed to uphold. His dedication to his culture deteriorated and he let his people down. In response to his wife, Olunde states that his " powers deserted him" and that he " could do nothing to save himself"(Soyinka, 55). It is easy for him to disguise his shame and blame it on those who captured him, but in reality he feared death.

Through westernization, Olunde proves himself to be more devoted than his own father. When Olunde finds out his father did not go through with the ritual, he is engulfed in shame. Olunde makes the decision to go through with the ritual himself because he feels responsible in bringing honor to his family. His sacrifice is a statement to his father, reasserting the fact that leaving to go to Europe has not detached himself from his original roots. His father's failure allows Olunde to reconnect with his culture and prove his worthiness to his people.

Through culture, shame, and European influence it is clear that Olunde holds his traditional values more closely than that of his father. Experiencing life in Europe drew Olunde closer to his roots than ever before. He distinguished the differences between the two cultures and came to the realization that his honor belongs to Yoruba traditions. Due to Elesin's cultural reluctance, Olunde was obliged to overcome his father's fears and face death for his people. Clearly, through evidence in the play and analytical perspective, Olunde overcomes his father's dedication to their culture.