

Elisen as an aristotilian tragic hero



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

As in other plays, reflecting a specific culture, “ Death and the King’s Horseman” has kept close to religious and traditional issues, but it has shaped culture into a great tragedy. Aristotle defines tragedy in his book poetics as:

A tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in appropriate and pleasurable language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in a dramatic rather than narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish a catharsis of these emotions. (Aristotle, 23)

Death and the King’s Horseman encompasses tragic events that excite the audience’s emotions. It could be inferred from “ catharsis” that the aim of a tragic work is delivering the author’s thought and notions through affections, an effective device that could penetrate the soul. The feelings of pity and fear, aroused within the audience, are not mere affections towards the hero, but they enable the audience to accommodate the play’s main message and theme as well as be fully convinced of the author’s thought. Death and the King’s Horseman is a tragedy that aims to manifest the tragic consequences of disobeying the gods and not maintaining a state of order among the three worlds of the unborn, the living, and the ancestors. Greek tragic dramatists, Aeschylus and Sophocles, wrote religious dramas that were concerned with the relation between gods and the hero. Further, Soyinka’s play is very close to the Greek tragedy. A protagonist within a tragedy must be also tragic.

According to Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, the tragic hero has certain characteristics.

Aristotle says that the tragic hero will most effectively evoke both our pity and terror ..., and also that this tragic effect will be stronger if the hero is “better than we are”, in the sense that is of higher than ordinary moral worth. Such a man is exhibited as suffering a change in fortune from happiness to misery because of his mistaken choice of an action, to which he is led by hamartia-his “error” or “mistake of judgment” or, as it is often, although misleadingly and less literary translated, his tragic flaw. (Abrams, Harpham, 315)

The definition corresponds almost verbatim to the character of Elesin. Having the position of the king’s horseman, he ends up suffering and dies with shame. His demise is the consequence of his error that is the failure to fulfill his ritual duty. Elesin’s fall and agony arouse the audience’s compassion toward him and fear for themselves lest they may fall in the same mistake. Nonetheless, there is one thing that distinguishes him from the Greek tragic hero. Whereas the focus in the Greek tragedy is on the individual, the African theatre centers upon the community. In all these respects, *Death and the king’s horseman* is a tragic play that exposes the Aristotelian tragic hero, yet it includes one difference, differentiating it from the Greek tragedy.

The main reason behind Elesin’s tragic fate, according to Soyinka and the Nigerian ethos, is Elesin’s dereliction of duty. After having a very high

position in life, Elesin's negligence in accomplishing his ritual sacrifice decidedly begets tragic sequels.

How can that be? In all my life as Horseman of the King, the juiciest Fruit on every tree was mine. I saw, I touched, I wooed, rarely was the answer No. The honour of my place, the veneration I Received in the eye of man or woman prospered my suit and Played havoc with my sleeping hours.

(Soyinka, 76)

Socially, he becomes prostrate with humiliation, and, spiritually, he becomes a sinner and a defiant against the gods. Besides, he causes disastrous chaos among the world of the dead, which, according to the Yoruba community, is duplicated in the world of the living. Soyinka's Praise Singer-guardian of culture rebukes his erstwhile leader, "Elesin, we placed the reins of the world in your hands yet you watched it plunge over the edge of the bitter precipice" (Soyinka, 75). Lyaloja, also, admonishes him severely.

You have betrayed us. We fed you sweetmeats such as we

hoped awaited you on the other side. But you said No, I

must eat the world's left-overs. We said you were the hunter

who brought the quarry down; to you belonged the vital por-

tions of the game. No, you said, I am the hunter's dog and I

shall eat the entrails of the game and the faeces of the hunter.

We said you were the hunter returning home in triumph, a

<https://assignbuster.com/elisen-as-an-aristotilian-tragic-hero/>

slain buffalo pressing down on his neck; you said wait, I first

must turn up this cricket hole with my toes. (Soyinka, 68)

The play turns into a tragedy when Elesin is prevented from doing his ritual assignment. His son, Olunde, is the most person who pays for his father's mistake. When he sees that his father is still alive, he is filled with shame and sadness," I have no father, eater of left- overs" (Soyinka, 61) and , thence, the climatic catastrophe happens. He kills himself in order to compensate the shame his father has caused and make a contrite apology for the ancestors and his people. Lyaloja comments on that, pointing to Elesin the consequences for what he has done.

Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life. The son has proved the father Elesin, and there is nothing left in your mouth to gnash but infant gums. (Soyinka, 75)

Seeing the corpse of his son, Elesin is fixated on Olunde, and, thereupon, suddenly, he strangles himself with the chain before anyone can intervene. Lyaloja censures the white men for trying to stop him, commenting that he has finally gone on even though it is too late.

He is gone at last into the passage but oh, how late it is. His son will feast on the meat and throw him bones. The passage is clogged with droppings from the King's stallion; he will arrive all stained in dung. (Soyinka, 76)

Elesin's "hamartia" that is the reason of the nonfeasance of his mission could be interpreted as his surrender and submission to the European colonizer. Tanure Ojaide writes:

Elesin's failure is not refusing to die, but not dying at the appropriate moment. It is a ritual and there is a time for everything. However, Elesin delays and provides the opportunity for his arrest and the excuse not to die. (Online, Ojade)

Elesin in a moment of "blasphemy" surrenders to the outer forces.

It is when the alien hand pollutes the source of will, when a stranger force of violence shatters the mind's calm resolution, this is when a man is made to commit the awful treachery of relief, commit in his thought the unspeakable blasphemy of seeing the hand of the gods in this alien rupture of the world. I know it was this thought that killed me, sapped my powers and turned me into an infant in the hands of unnamable strangers. I made to utter my spells anew but my tongue merely rattled in my mouth. (Soyinka, 64)

Blaming the white man, his gods, and his bride, he forgets to consider his own role, "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, 65). Further, in another quotation, he almost admits that he yields up his will to the European hands, "My will was squelched in the spittle of an alien race" (Soyinka, 65). In addition, while Lyaloja is reprimanding Elesin, she alludes darkly to his submission and says that he has allowed them to be the dominators of the situation (Soyinka, 65). In fact, Lyaloja's words could be hitting home as when the inducement of

death came from Elesin's heart, nothing prevented him from fulfilling his duty, neither the iron bars nor the "alien race".

The very feature that distinguishes Death and the King's Horseman from the Greek tragedy is the thought of individualism which could be seen as a fundamental tragic crux. Yoruba religion pivots wholly on the community's good and prosperity. The thought of individualism is considered as a great ignominy. Since they deem that the whole humankind is correlated, the individual's selfishness afflicts the three worlds of the universe (the living, the ancestors and the unborn) and, as a corollary, the individual himself is afflicted. Therefore, there is no room for egotism.

In "The Fourth Stage" and later in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, Soyinka explores what he understands to be the relation in Yoruba cosmology between man, the gods, and the ancestors. The essence of this cosmology, as he expounds it, is in direct contradiction to the Christian and European emphasis on the individual and individual salvation. For the Yoruba the emphasis is on community, and community in this context makes no distinction between the dead, the living, and the unborn. The emphasis is on continuity, on maintaining the continuous and contiguous relationship of these three stages of being. (Ralph Bowman, 82)

Mark Ralph-Bowman asserts that in order to appreciate the “ religious mystery” (82) which lies at the heart of the play we must forget “ the whole western tradition of individual tragedy” (84). Although the protagonist has the appearance of a tragic hero, “ the grandeur, dignity, and pathos of Oedipus; the questing anguish of Hamlet” (94), one must not be misled into interpreting the play in such terms. What it asserts, according to Ralph-Bowman, is not the tragic loss of an individual, but the communal Yoruba values by which Elesin is found wanting, and condemned. “ Though a creation of such stature,” Ralph-Bowman argues, “ he has to be totally and unequivocally renounced” (94). Elesin is rejected by the world of the play because he allows himself to be diverted by selfish individualism from the sacrificial death that his Yoruba religion prescribes. (Booth, 529)

Soyinka explicitly shows this idea in the play. Elesin illustrates to Pilkings that what he has done does not harm him only, but it afflicts the whole community,” I am stopped from fulfilling my destiny. Did you think it all out before, this plan to push our world from its course and sever the cord that links us to the great origin?” (Soyinka, 63). Another instance is the story of the captain in the war that is emblematic of these opposing viewpoints: Jane sees the man’s deliberate death as unreasonable and unjustified,” Nonsense. Life should never be thrown deliberately away” (Soyinka, 53), and Olunde lauds it as self-sacrifice and a great honor. The conversation between Olunde and Jane manifests these divergences. Jane asks Olunde if he can explain how he has this acceptance and satisfaction with his father’s death. Olunde replies that he started mourning for his father as soon as he heard of the King’s demise (Souinka, 53). He asserts that it is Elesin’s duty towards his

community and that he mustn't dishonor his people," What can you offer [Elesin] in place of his peace of mind, in place of the honour and veneration of his own people?" (Soyinka, 53). These divergences in thought may be the main reason behind Elesin's tragic fate, and because the English colonizer is the stronger in this battle, he managed to interfere. Lyaloja's ultimate words to Pilking avers that. When Pilking asks her if this tragic end is what she wants. Turning her blame and venom on him, she replies:

No child, it is what you brought to be, you who play with strangers' lives, who even usurp the vestments of our dead, yet believe that the stain of death will not cling to you. The gods demanded only the old expired plantain but you cut down the sap-laden shoot to feed your pride. (Soyinka , 83)

Thus. Eesin tragedy could be summed up as a great man is undone for his aim is butted up against the law of the European man. In all these respects, the difference between the ideologies of the two tragedies, begetting the tragic destiny, is obvious. The Nigerian tragedy is not about the tragic fall of an individual; it is the whole community that is in distress.

The Nigerian audience would be inclined to despise such weak character as Elesin; however, Soyinka has very skillfully heightened the human interest of the play, and thus enlisted the audience's pity and fear. It is in his suffering in prison and his son's death that Elesin rises to the heights of the tragic grandeur, and the audience forgets his fault. For the last act of the play, the incidents and the poetic language Soyinka applies restore the fallen Elesin's hold on the audience. in a scene of gloom, Elesin is chained up in a prison cell, in a state of melancholy. His heart is full of guilt and shame. All the

people come to humiliate and admonish him, and he asks forgiveness from them, " may the world for give me" (Soyinka, 73) . The people, who to a great extent are responsible for his misery, has put him in prison and confined his freedom. He is in complete paralysis and confusion; he does not know who to put the blame on his gods, or the white man, or himself. In this scene, Soyinka has laid bare the suffering soul of Elesin. In addition, the spectacle in which Olunde lays dead and his father is looking at him captures the essence of tragedy. The last act closes with two corpses on the stage, making *Death and the King's Horseman* a great tragedy.

All things considered, Elesin, in all aspects, is regarded as Aristotelian tragic hero, except for the notion of individualism. He is a distinguished person who falls into misfortune on account of hamartia or a tragic flaw. The tragic destiny he ends with arouses the audience's feel of sympathy and fear. Soyinka's application of tragic events looms large the theme of *Death and the King's Horseman* that is condemning and disparaging the European colonizer.

Works cited

Abrams, M. H, Geoffrey Galt. *A Hand book of Literary Terms*. India:

Cengage Learning, 2009. Print.

Booth, James. " Self-sacrifice and Human Sacrifice in Soyinka's " *death and the King's Horseman*"". *Research in African Literatures* 19. 4 (1988):

529-550. Web. 15 April 2016.

<https://assignbuster.com/elisen-as-an-aristotilian-tragic-hero/>

Butcher, A. Translation by SH. "The poetics of Aristotle." (1942). Print.

Ralph-Bowman, Mark. "" leaders and Left-overs": A Reading of Soyinka's

" death and the King's Horseman"". Research in African

Literatures 14. 1 (1983): 81-97. Web. 15 April 26, 2016.

Soyinka, Wole. Death and the king's Horseman). London: Methuen Drama,

1998.

Ojaide, Tanure. " Teaching Wole Soyinka's" Death and the King's

Horseman" to American College Students." College Literature 19. 3/1

(1992): 210-214.