Death and the King's Horseman

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WOLE SOYINKA

Soyinka grew up in British-ruled Nigeria. His family was relatively well off; his father was an Anglican minister and the headmaster of a religious school, which meant the family had access to electricity and radio at home. Soyinka studied in Nigeria at a college affiliated with the University of London and relocated to England after graduation, where he pursued an advanced degree at the University of Leeds. *The Lion and the Jewel* was his second play, and its success allowed him to move to London. Over the next ten years, Soyinka continued to write plays and edit literary periodicals both in England in Nigeria. In the '60s, Soyinka became involved with politics. He was arrested several times and kept in prison for two years, and one of his books was banned in Nigeria. Soyinka wrote *Death and the King's Horseman* in 1975 during a time of exile from Nigeria, and it's become one of his most famous works. He has been married three times and has five children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The story of *Death and the King's Horseman* is based on real events that took place in Nigeria in 1946, when the English district commissioner attempted to stop the king's horseman from committing ritual suicide. Several historians have noted, however, that the tradition of the king's horseman following the king to the afterlife isn't actually rooted in religious necessity, and that at the time, the king's horseman *not* being able to commit suicide wouldn't have rocked the community as much as Elesin's failure does in the play. The egungun costumes that the Pilkingses wear are part of the Yoruba religious tradition. The costumes are worn so that the wearer can channel ancestors; this is why Amusa insists that he's actually looking at the dead when he looks at the costumes.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of Wole Soyinka's plays and novels consider similar themes as *Death and the King's Horseman*, in particular the difficult relationship between traditional Nigerian culture and Western modernization. His other works include his early play *The Lion and the Jewel*, his novel *Season of Anomy*, and the memoir *Aké: The Years of Childhood*. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is another well-known Nigerian novelist who considers the intersections between traditional Nigerian culture and western influence, though in a later time period in Nigerian history. The play *Oba Wàjà*, which was written by Duro Ladipo and published in the Yoruba language, deals with the same historical event as *Death and the King's Horseman*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Death and the King's Horseman
- **When Written:** 1973-74
- **Where Written:** Cambridge, England
- **When Published:** 1975
- **Literary Period:** Postcolonial African Diaspora
- **Genre:** Drama, Tragedy
- **Setting:** Oyo, Nigeria; sometime during World War Two
- **Climax:** Elesin commits suicide
- **Antagonist:** Simon Pilkings and the British; Colonialism
- **Point of View:** Theater

EXTRA CREDIT

Poems from Prison. Soyinka has been critical of corruption in government for much of his life, though he became far more active in his criticisms in the mid-1960s. During his first imprisonment, Soyinka wrote a number of poems and notes on tissue paper criticizing the Nigerian government.

Egungun. The egungun costumes like those the Pilkingses wear are an essential element of the Yoruba religious tradition. The garment covers the wearer completely, and the layers of cloth that make up the garment represent the spirit world and the world of the living. The more elaborate and expensive the cloth is, the wealthier and more powerful the family and the ancestor are.

PLOT SUMMARY

Near the end of the day, Elesin, the king's horseman, dances through the market. He's eager to reach the market and assures his praise-singer that he just wants to be in the market among the women, where he's happy. The praise-singer makes sure that Elesin still plans to die later. Elesin assures him that he's happy to die, but now, he wants the women to dress him in fine clothes and enjoy life. To show the praise-singer how serious he is about dying, Elesin dances and chants the story of the Not-I bird. The Not-I bird goes around to all people, animals, and gods, telling them it's time to die. All the beings tell the bird they're not ready and hide away, but Elesin says that when the bird came for him, he told it he'd be right along. As Elesin tells this story, the women of the market, including Iyaloja, surround him and dance with him. He and the women perform a call and response chant in which he assures them

that he's going to die.

Elesin, the women, and the praise-singer discuss how honorable Elesin is, but Elesin takes offense when the women praise him. They're not sure what they said wrong, but Elesin finally admits that he just wants them to dress him in fine clothes. Elesin catches sight of something in the distance, and the distraction, a beautiful young woman, walks into the market. The praise-singer thinks that Elesin is going crazy when he begins to talk about possibly being dead already. They discuss Elesin's reputation as a ladies' man, and Elesin asks about who the woman was. Iyaloja hesitantly explains that the woman is already engaged. This annoys Elesin, but he persists and says that since it's his last day on earth, he should be allowed to marry her, conceive a child with her, and leave this as a parting gift. Though Iyaloja tries to convince Elesin that this is a bad idea, she finally gives in.

Later that evening, at the district officer's house, Simon Pilkings and his wife, Jane, **tango** through their living room. They're dressed in egungun costumes. The local sergeant, Amusa, arrives with news, but is distraught when he sees the egungun. He refuses to look at Pilkings or tell him anything, which makes Pilkings very angry—especially since Amusa is a Muslim and, in Pilkings's understanding, shouldn't be upset about this. Finally, Pilkings tells Amusa to just write down his report.

Amusa's report is disturbing: Elesin plans to "commit death," which Amusa says is a criminal offense. Pilkings and Jane believe Elesin is going to murder someone, and Jane suggests they skip the costume ball later to deal with this disturbance. Pilkings decides to just arrest Elesin. They call for their houseboy, Joseph, who explains that Elesin is going to kill himself so he can accompany the king, who died a month ago, to the afterlife. Pilkings sighs. He has history with Elesin: he snuck Elesin's oldest son, Olunde, out and sent him to England to train as a doctor four years ago, despite Elesin insisting that Olunde needed to stay for some ritual. They reason that this is the ritual, and Jane realizes that Olunde would be the next king's horseman. Joseph excuses himself when Pilkings calls the natives "devious bastards." Pilkings calls Joseph back to explain what the drumming is about, and is angry when Joseph says he can't tell; it sounds both like a wedding and a death. Joseph leaves again and Jane declares that they need to stay home and deal with this. Pilkings sends Joseph to the police station with a note, tells Jane to put her costume back on, and shares that the prince is going to be at the ball, so they have to go.

Back in the market, Amusa and his constables try to get through a group of women to enter a stall that's draped in rich cloth. The women insult Amusa for working for the English, mock his virility, and accuse him of trespassing. They refuse to let him any closer to Elesin and say that Elesin will prove himself more powerful than the white men by killing himself. Iyaloja arrives to mediate the situation, but joins the women in insulting Amusa. Several young girls take matters into their own hands. They steal the officers' batons and hats, and then act out a scene in which they're Englishmen discussing the lying natives and the horrendous weather. This insults and embarrasses Amusa, but Iyaloja refuses to come to his defense. Finally, Amusa and his constables leave. The women dance and celebrate the girls as Elesin steps out of the stall. He has just had sex with his new wife, and says that the future lies with his child that the bride will bear. Elesin begins to listen to the drums, narrate what's happening, and dance toward death. The women dance with him as he says that the king's dog and horse are dying, and then the praise-singer reminds Elesin of what he must do. Elesin sinks deeper and deeper into the trance and the praise-singer tells Elesin that if those on the other side don't honor him properly, they'll welcome him back.

At the ball, the band plays music to introduce the prince. The prince is taken with the egungun costumes, but the resident soon pulls Pilkings outside to explain a note that arrived from Amusa about Elesin's suicide. The resident reminds Pilkings that he needs to be vigilant in order to support the empire, and when Amusa arrives, the resident asks if Amusa is part of the riot. Pilkings tries to get Amusa to give him his report, but Amusa again refuses to speak to him in the egungun costume. Pilkings dismisses Amusa as the clock strikes midnight. He and Jane wonder if this is the moment that Elesin will kill himself, and Pilkings runs away.

Olunde, who has returned from England, finds Jane outside and asks for Pilkings. They discuss her costume and though Olunde will look at her, he says she's still doing a disrespectful thing by wearing the egungun. He explains that she doesn't understand why it's wrong because she's English. They discuss World War II, which is currently going on, and the ethics of killing oneself to save many others. Jane refuses to direct Olunde to Pilkings, and is shocked when Olunde says that he's here to bury Elesin and stop Pilkings from trying to stop Elesin from dying. He tries to make it clear that Elesin needs to die and is doing an honorable thing, but Jane won't have it. She becomes increasingly upset as Olunde points out that thousands of Englishmen are dying in the war—something he suggests is mass suicide. Olunde leads Jane outside to listen to the drums and notes the moment in which Elesin dies. Jane is disturbed by Olunde's calm and attracts the attention of the aide-de-camp, but she sends him away. Olunde tries to explain why he was so calm, but also attempts to excuse himself to go sit with his father's body.

From offstage, Olunde and Jane hear Pilkings telling someone to restrain people. Pilkings steps into sight and is shocked when Olunde says that it would've been a tragedy had Pilkings succeeded in stopping Elesin. Pilkings refuses to let Olunde go see his father and then speaks with the aide-de-camp. He wants to know if he can put Elesin in the cellar where they used to keep slaves. As Pilkings marches away, Olunde and Jane wonder what's causing so much commotion. Their question is

answered when they hear Elesin, yelling angrily. Elesin races into view but stops when he sees Olunde. He falls at Olunde's feet, and Olunde insults his father and walks away.

In his cell, Elesin stands, his wrists **chained**, and looks at the moon. There are two guards in the cell with him, and his bride sits demurely outside. Pilkings tries to talk about how calm and peaceful the night is, but Elesin insists that the night isn't calm by any means: Pilkings has destroyed Elesin's life and the lives of others. They argue about whether Pilkings was just doing his duty or not. Elesin explains that he's not at risk of dying anymore, as he was supposed to die at a specific moment a while ago. He says that he doesn't blame Pilkings, even though he's ruined his life by stealing Olunde and stopping Elesin from doing what he needs to do. Pilkings tries to comfort Elesin by saying that not everything is as bad as it seems; Olunde thinks that this is salvageable. Elesin disagrees, but thinks that he no longer has any honor and cannot even call himself Olunde's father.

Pilkings leaves, and Elesin tells his bride that he blames her in part for his failure, as she showed him that there are things on earth that he still wants to enjoy, and he didn't want to die. Pilkings and Jane return and argue if Olunde and Iyaloja should be allowed to visit Elesin. Elesin assures Pilkings that nothing worse than what's already happened will come of Iyaloja visiting. Pilkings shows Iyaloja in and she immediately begins to berate Elesin. She says that he's dishonored himself and the world, and reminds him that she warned him this would happen. He tries to explain why he faltered, but she's unsympathetic. Iyaloja says that she's coming with a burden. Pilkings tries to show Iyaloja out, but she refuses to leave and says that Elesin must perform certain things. Their king will be upset in the afterlife, and he needs to let their king go.

The aide-de-camp races in to say that there are women at the bottom of the hill. Since it's just women, the aide-de-camp agrees to let them into the cellar. They enter, carrying a cylindrical object on their shoulders that's covered in cloth. Iyaloja says that it's the burden and the king's courier, and Elesin needs to whisper in the courier's ear so he can release the king. Pilkings refuses to let Elesin out. The praise-singer reminds Elesin of what his duty was and says that someone else took Elesin's place. The women reveal that the cloth covers Olunde's body, and the praise-singer continues to tell Elesin how he has ruined things.

Horrified, Elesin flings his chains around his neck and strangles himself. Pilkings tries to resuscitate him, but Iyaloja tells him to stop. When he asks if this is what she wanted, Iyaloja answers that this is what Pilkings gets when he doesn't respect the customs of others surrounding death. The bride closes Elesin's eyes and pours a bit of dirt over them, and Iyaloja leads her away. Iyaloja encourages the bride to think of her unborn child.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Elesin – Elesin is the titular horseman of the play. He's a vibrant man who loves life and, due his role as the king's horseman, has been able to to enjoy it to the fullest. He eats the finest foods, dances with the women in the market, and has sex with and marries almost whomever he wants to in the moment. Because the king died a month before the start of the play, Elesin must commit suicide to join him, and has had a month to prepare for his passage to the afterlife. The women in the market adore Elesin. He loves fine clothes, so they dress him in beautiful and elaborate cloth to commemorate his last day in the land of the living. He shows himself to be a jokester, a storyteller, and a dancer as he interacts with those around him at the market. Through the praise-singer, Iyaloja, and Simon Pilkings, the reader/audience learns that Elesin is an extremely honorable man who's fully entrenched in the customs of his people. Elesin does choose to change up the customs surrounding his death a bit when he decides he must take a final wife, the young woman, before he dies. Especially since the bride is actually engaged to Iyaloja's son, this suggests that Elesin is more selfish than the talk about how honorable he is might suggest. This is confirmed when later, Elesin fails to commit suicide. Though he blames Pilkings (who arrests Elesin at the moment he tries to die), the gods, and his bride in turn, Elesin eventually admits that he loved life too much and didn't entirely want to die. Not dying dishonors Elesin beyond all recovery, so when he sees that his son Olunde died to take his place (which dishonors Elesin even further, as his son isn't supposed to give himself to his father like that), Elesin commits suicide with his **chains**. Iyaloja notes that even in the afterlife, Elesin will be dishonored and will arrive covered in the manure from the king's stallion.

Iyaloja – The "mother of the market." She has a close and friendly relationship with Elesin and, along with the praise-singer, acts as Elesin's moral compass and a conscience of sorts. She wants to please him and is happy to do so by helping the other market women dress him in fine cloth, but she's also the only one to question him when he asks to take a young woman as his wife in the hours before his death. With this, Iyaloja shows that she has a vested interest in making sure that Elesin follows protocol and doesn't ruin things by changing the plan, as she warns him several times that he should make sure he doesn't leave a curse behind by having sex with his new bride. At this point, Iyaloja seems to not have much power, given that she feels she cannot deny Elesin his bride even though she thinks the marriage isn't a good idea. After Elesin fails to die, however, Iyaloja comes into her full power. She berates Elesin for knocking the world off its course and upending the cosmic order by failing to die. Iyaloja makes it very clear that women will have to bear the burden of Elesin's mistake by having the market women carry Olunde's body to Elesin's cell so he can

see how the consequences of his actions. She speaks often in Yoruba proverbs, which allows her to force Elesin to connect with his culture and his religion by interpreting them. After Elesin dies, Iyaloja blames Pilkings for killing Elesin and creating an environment in which Elesin failed—and where a disaster like Olunde's suicide could happen. However, Iyaloja also shows that she recognizes the importance of looking forward, not backward, when she tells the bride to think of her unborn child, not of the living or the dead.

Simon Pilkings – The district officer in the colonial Nigerian city of Oyo. He's self-important, pompous, and has no time for the native religious practices, which he refers to as "nonsense" and "mumbo-jumbo." Because he thinks so little of the Yoruba religion and the people, he sees no problem with wearing the egungun to a costume party a few weeks after confiscating the costumes from the leaders of the egungun cult of the dead. Pilkings is cruel and callous to everyone who is (or who he believes is) below him in the hierarchy. This includes Elesin and Amusa, as well as his wife, Jane. He's especially dismissive of Jane's attempts to make him understand the importance of being sensitive to the local culture and customs, and shouts at her to stop interfering with his work. Pilkings only takes Elesin's suicide so seriously because the prince of England is visiting, and because of that, Pilkings feels that he has to look competent and in control in front of his superiors. His manner implies that the rest of the time, he takes control when the mood strikes him or when it suits him to do so, and simply behaves rudely and derisively the rest of the time. Though Pilkings says that Elesin dying wouldn't be a great loss—he's had run-ins with Elesin in the past and finds Elesin difficult to deal with and annoyingly entrenched in native customs—Pilkings does fully believe in the Christian idea that suicide is a sin. To this end, Pilkings does his best to stop Elesin's death, and succeeds. He tells Elesin that he's doing his duty by saving him, and refuses to consider that he's actually doing Elesin and the local people a major disservice.

Olunde – Olunde is Elesin's oldest son and therefore, is next in line to become the king's horseman. Four years prior to the start of the play, Pilkings helped sneak Olunde out of Nigeria so he could go to England and train as a doctor. According to Pilkings and Jane, at that point, Olunde was a bright and sensitive young man, more suited to becoming a poet than a doctor. When Olunde finally appears in the flesh, he's a handsome figure and wears a Western suit. Through his conversation with Jane, he shows himself to be wise, honorable, and calm. He speaks highly of things like Elesin's death and the suicide of a ship's captain who exploded his ship to save civilians, suggesting that it's extremely important—and usually worth it—for one person to sacrifice themselves for the good of many. Because he's been in England for four years, Olunde has a firm understanding of both his native Yoruba culture and English culture. He conceptualizes his involvement with the two cultures as a good thing, as it allows him to defend his native culture and understand why the English behave the way they do. Olunde demonstrates just how strongly he believes in Yoruba traditions when, upon seeing Elesin alive when he should be dead, Olunde insults and disowns his father. He later kills himself to take Elesin's place as the king's horseman in the afterlife.

Jane Pilkings – Pilkings's wife. She's far more understanding and thoughtful than her husband, though she also fully supports Pilkings in his work of policing the native population in Nigeria, and at times, seems even more dutiful to the cause than he does—she's the one to suggest that they skip the ball so that he can deal with Elesin's suicide. An observant woman who wants to understand, Jane often tries to tell Pilkings to behave more politely to the natives or explains that whatever he's doing is rude in their culture. Despite this, she also doesn't think highly of the natives at all and considers them primitive, while she finds English culture to be refined and superior. She believes in the Christian ideal of the sanctity of all life, so she's dismissive of Elesin's suicide and of the deaths of other individuals who sacrifice themselves for the greater good. However, she also doesn't see anything wrong with all of the young Englishmen who are dying in World War Two. During her conversation with Olunde, she tries her best to understand why he wants Elesin to follow through with his suicide, and why Olunde isn't upset that his father is dying. Though she's able to get information from Olunde that helps the reader/audience understand, she herself cannot manage to see things from Olunde's perspective.

The Praise-Singer – The praise-singer is a man who accompanies Elesin and acts as his conscience and spiritual guide. After Elesin is gone, the praise-singer will be the one responsible for singing about Elesin so that future generations remember him and know who he was. He and Elesin appear to be extremely close and the praise-singer is sad to lose Elesin to the afterlife; he offers to accept Elesin back with open arms if the gods and dead kings on the other side don't properly honor Elesin. As Elesin's moral compass, the praise-singer offers warnings about taking a bride and spending so much time with women, and he leads the dancing and chanting as Elesin dances closer to death.

Sergeant Amusa – Amusa is a native Nigerian man who converted to Islam several years before the action of the play. He serves under Pilkings as a police officer for the English colonizers. Despite being a Muslim, Amusa still has strong ties to the native culture and religion; for example, he cannot bring himself to look at or speak to Pilkings and Jane when he finds them in the egungun costumes. He's easily offended and seems insecure in his role as a policeman tasked with policing the local population. He threatens violence against Iyaloja and the other women in the market when they mock him and refuse to let him arrest Elesin.

The Aide-de-Camp – Another colonial official; Pilkings refers to him as Bob at several points. He attends closely to the prince and seems to have a solid relationship with Pilkings, as he offers Pilkings extra soldiers when Pilkings goes to arrest Elesin. The aide-de-camp cares deeply for others, but only when those others are English. He's extremely rude to Olunde and suggests that the natives become too full of themselves as soon as they start to embrace Western culture.

The Bride / The Young Woman – A beautiful young woman engaged to Iyaloja's son. Elesin catches sight of her and decides he wants to marry her before he dies. She doesn't speak at all in the play, and goes along with what Elesin and others tell her to do. It's implied that she becomes pregnant with Elesin's child.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Joseph – The houseboy for Simon and Jane. He's a relatively recent convert to Christianity and Simon appreciates his willingness to look at the egungun costumes. Despite his obedience, Joseph appears to dislike Simon and seems to like Jane only marginally more than her husband. His affect is flat and emotionless.

The Prince – The visiting prince of England. Though he doesn't speak, he appears to enjoy the costume ball in his honor. Olunde suggests that the prince is brave, given that he chooses to undertake the journey to Nigeria in the middle of World War Two.

The Resident – The man above Pilkings in the ranks of colonial officials in Nigeria. He's self-important and believes fully in doing everything to properly support the English Empire, so he chastises Pilkings for not knowing about Elesin's prospective suicide earlier.

The King – The king doesn't appear in the play itself; he died about a month before the action of the play starts. He and Elesin were extremely close.

TERMS

Egungun – Ceremonial costumes that Yoruba men wear during a specific annual ceremony to honor the dead. The costume allows the wearer to channel the ancestors. Only men can wear them.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LIFE AND DEATH

The action of *Death and the King's Horseman* begins a month after the king's death. Per Yoruba religious tradition, Elesin, the titular horseman (a title that signifies that he's in service to the king and shares many of the same rights and perks, but without the same responsibilities), must commit ritual suicide so that he can accompany the king to the afterlife. Things become complicated, however, when the Englishman Simon Pilkings, the local district officer, discovers that Elesin intends to commit suicide while the prince of England is visiting. Through Pilkings's attempts to stop Elesin from committing suicide, the play begins to explore the function and the cultural significance of death, both for the Yoruba people and for the English. Ultimately, the play makes it very clear that death is something different for every culture—and that interrupting one culture's way of thinking about the relationship between life and death can have disastrous consequences.

For Elesin, the past month has been a time of transition. The death of the king a month before means that Elesin has had thirty days to prepare for his own journey toward death and has therefore been existing in a liminal, transitional state. Despite this—and despite Elesin's assurance to both his praise-singer and Iyaloja, the mother of the market, that he plans to follow through with tradition and die—the way that Elesin behaves and is described in the stage notes suggests that he's more connected to life than he might think. This, Soyinka suggests in his introduction, is the true conflict of the play: that Elesin is too entrenched in the land of the living to successfully cross over to the land of the dead to join his king.

The most significant way that Soyinka demonstrates how connected Elesin is to life is through his desire for material and carnal pleasures. Elesin teases the women in the marketplace, which results in them dressing him in colorful, elaborate clothing, something that Elesin clearly takes great pleasure in. He also insists on marrying in the hours before his death for no other reason than that the bride, the young woman he sees walking through the market, is extremely beautiful and he wants to have sex with her. Both Iyaloja and the praise-singer suggest that this is a problem, whatever Elesin has to say on the matter. Iyaloja cautions Elesin to make sure that his "seed doesn't attract a curse"—in other words, she tries to warn Elesin that participating in the marriage ceremonies so close to his death might tie him to the world of the living to the point where dying could become difficult when the time comes. Ultimately, she's right to be concerned: Elesin falters in his attempt to die and later, halfheartedly blames his new bride for tempting him. With this, Elesin admits that he did love life too much, even as he regrets that he wasn't able to end it.

Despite Elesin's struggles to end his life, the way that the Yoruba characters speak about death casts death as something not only inevitable, but honorable—especially when, as was

supposed to be Elesin's case, a person has the ability to prepare for and embrace their coming death. This also suggests that life can be more fulfilling when a person lives knowing full well that death is on its way. This contrasts dramatically with the way that the English characters think of life and death. Pilkings believes in a Christian ideal of the sanctity of all life; thus, Elesin's suicide is something blasphemous and unthinkable, rather than a way for Elesin to exercise agency over how and when his spirit crosses over to the land of the dead. Interestingly, Elesin's love of life and the way he goes about enjoying his life suggest that even if he does still adhere to Yoruba beliefs dictating that he must die, he might have more in common with Pilkings than Elesin is comfortable admitting. Indeed, even Pilkings brings up a Yoruba proverb suggesting that nobody dies entirely willingly, no matter their station in life or their belief system. With this, Pilkings suggests that Elesin's hesitation is normal and understandable even within the context of his own belief system, and even if it has disastrous consequences.

As appalling as Pilkings finds Elesin's ritual suicide attempt and as catastrophic as Elesin's failure is for Iyaloja and the Yoruba people, more horrifying for everyone—Pilkings, Elesin, and the reader/audience alike—is Elesin's successful suicide behind bars after he sees the body of his oldest son, Olunde, who took Elesin's place in the spiritual world as the king's horseman when Elesin failed to die. Being refused his original, planned death robs Elesin of all dignity and power. While dying as planned would've meant that he'd be honored by both the living and the dead, not being able to die dishonors Elesin in the eyes of everyone and makes it so that the tradition of the king's horseman cannot continue in the futures of the living, given that Olunde (who would've been the next horseman) is also dead. Dishonored in both life and death, Elesin kills himself with the **chains** that bind him, and Iyaloja tells Pilkings that Pilkings is the one to blame, as he "usurp[s] the vestments of our dead, yet believe[s] that the stain of death will not cling to [him]." With this, Iyaloja suggests that the true crime committed by both Elesin and Pilkings is not accepting the inevitability of death and not allowing others to greet death on their own terms.

WOMEN AND POWER

While *Death and the King's Horseman* isn't overtly about relationships between men and women, observing the way that all the play's women act and are treated by the men around them offers extensive insight into how women function in Yoruba society and English colonial society alike. In both cultures, women are treated as keepers of culture and as the interpreters of their own cultures for others, suggesting that while women in the play may not have power in the contemporary Western sense of the word, their power lies in translating the meaning and significance of events for others and upholding social order. In theory, at least, women reap the benefits of these actions when the men around them behave appropriately and honor them for their work.

As the only named Yoruba woman in the play, Iyaloja, the mother of the market, is a compelling and powerful character simply by virtue of who she is. She's the only woman willing to question Elesin's intentions to his face when he asks to marry the young woman, and she's the most vocal critic of his choice to marry right before his death. In these situations, Iyaloja reveals that her role in Yoruba society is to ensure that things proceed smoothly and as they should per tradition. It's worth remembering that according to Yoruba religious beliefs, Iyaloja—as well as everyone else in society, women and men alike—benefits from men like Elesin doing what they're supposed to do. While the reader/audience is never told exactly what happens if Elesin fails in his task, it's made abundantly clear that it will negatively affect everyone, both in the land of the living and in the land of the dead. In this way, Iyaloja is working to make sure that everyone benefits and everyone follows the rules, even someone as powerful as Elesin.

The girls who turn Amusa away from the market when he first tries to arrest Elesin perform a similar function. Though unnamed, they nonetheless stop Amusa from ruining an important ritual and distracting Elesin even further from his important task of dying later. They also taunt Amusa for abandoning Yoruba beliefs and choosing to serve the English—in other words, for exiting their society. In this way, the Yoruba female characters demonstrate that their true loyalty is to their belief system and their culture. Anyone who stands in their way, no matter how powerful or what religion they are, will be condemned and dismissed—as evidenced most poignantly when Iyaloja brutally insults Elesin for failing to die and in doing so, dooming the Yoruba people to a horrendous, if undescribed, fate.

Jane Pilkings performs some of the same roles that the Yoruba women do, though the way that her husband treats her suggests that she has nowhere near as much power in her marriage as the Yoruba women do in their society. Jane mostly functions as a fumbling and poorly informed interpreter of Yoruba culture for Pilkings. Though she doesn't understand it, she takes Amusa's unwillingness to look at her and Pilkings in the egungun costumes seriously and attempts to make Pilkings behave respectfully and with more understanding in his interaction with Amusa. In this case, however, Jane has very little power to actually influence her husband's behavior. Pilkings does eventually dismiss Amusa for the night, but he does so out of exasperation and tells Jane that she's just as silly for taking Amusa seriously as Amusa is for taking offense in the first place. While Elesin teases the women and makes sure that he gets his way in whatever he wants, unlike Pilkings, he at least takes Iyaloja's concerns seriously.

Jane also facilitates for the audience a conversation with Olunde that reveals some of the cultural beliefs of the Yoruba people. Importantly, Jane *wants* to understand, which is more than can be said for Pilkings, but she nevertheless fails to either understand why Elesin must die or pass on information to Pilkings that might make him understand why he shouldn't intervene. However unsuccessful Jane might be in creating any meaningful action or change within the play, the questions that she asks do allow the audience insight into what's going on and why—which, in turn, encourages the reader/audience to see Jane and Pilkings as antagonists, not righteous fighters for a good cause. Put another way, though female characters as a group don't necessarily enjoy any power that comes through action, their power is in what they say and what they can do with their words: unlike the male characters, they can help others understand. Given that all the male characters are unsuccessful in carrying out their goals—Pilkings doesn't stop Elesin from killing himself; Elesin cannot kill himself in the proper manner; and Olunde can't go on to be a doctor or the king's horseman—the play elevates the power of speech and communication over action, and suggests that it's only thanks to those who play an interpretive role that society will function properly.

DUTY AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Death and the King's Horseman is extremely interested in exploring what it means to be dutiful and honorable—to oneself, to one's people, and to one's spiritual beliefs. Given that duty is what drives Elesin in his attempts to commit suicide and is also what drives Pilkings's attempts to stop Elesin, it's worth considering the ways in which the respective duties of these two men and their two cultures mirror each other. Though the play is upfront, both in its introduction and in the text itself, to show that Pilkings is inarguably wrong to try to stop Elesin from killing himself, it nonetheless suggests that the fault of both men was acting selfishly, rather than acting for the greater and collective good: that is, doing their duty to others.

It's important to keep in mind that while none of the play's characters explain what would happen if Elesin fails in his suicide attempt, Iyaloja, Olunde, and the praise-singer all say at various points that the results would be disastrous. Olunde points out that while Pilkings fears a riot if Elesin succeeds, he should actually fear a riot if Elesin *doesn't*—Elesin's death is important enough to the Yoruba people that denying it to them is extremely dangerous. Despite the fact that Elesin is aware of the importance of his death and knows that it's the only way to maintain this cosmic order, he nonetheless chooses to behave selfishly in his final hours by marrying the young woman he sees in the market. Notably, there's no ceremonial or spiritual reason why Elesin decides he must have this young woman—and indeed, the woman is engaged and Elesin marries out from under her fiancé, who is Iyaloja's son. With this, Elesin not only upends the equilibrium of the community by denying Iyaloja's son his bride; he does so for no other reason than his own pleasure. Because he later blames his inability to follow through with his suicide on his bride, this suggests that Elesin's downfall was his decision to behave selfishly, rather than die for the greater good.

As the district officer, Pilkings is tasked with maintaining order in the colony, primarily by stamping out the local religion and replacing it with Christianity. However, the way that Pilkings behaves suggests that while he doesn't respect the local people and their religions at any time, he has even less respect for them when someone is watching—in this case, the prince of England. Pilkings takes the news of Elesin's impending suicide so seriously only because there's someone extremely important around whom he'd like to impress by making it appear as though the colony is safe and under control. This is something that, in the context of the logic and goals of a colonial power, Pilkings should be trying to do all the time in order to properly serve the British Empire. In this way, Soyinka shows that Pilkings's attempt to stop Elesin isn't actually undertaken to help the empire further its goals: it's a way for him to look good and nothing more. His failure to either stop Elesin or impress the prince shows that performing one's duty only when it's convenient is wildly ineffective and misguided.

In his conversation with Jane, Olunde encourages her to look beyond her horror at the idea of ritual suicide and see that within the Yoruba belief system, Elesin is doing his people a massive favor by insuring their spiritual wellness. He also expands this idea to encompass the entire globe by suggesting that sacrificing one person for the sake of hundreds or thousands of others is usually worth it. Jane mentions in an offhand way that several weeks ago, a ship's captain died in the harbor when he exploded his ship, which contained some kind of dangerous material and posed a risk to the people living around the harbor. She insists that the captain's sacrifice was disgusting and unnecessary, while Olunde encourages her to see it as "an affirmative commentary on life." In contrast, he points out that English soldiers are dying at alarming rates in the war, while English newscasters insist that the country is experiencing victory after victory—in other words, that the English are sacrificing droves of people, while also refusing to honor them by calling the deaths of those men a massive humanitarian crisis.

Because Olunde believes so strongly in this sense of duty to the communal good, it's shocking for him when Elesin appears, very much alive and therefore, within the logic of Yoruba theology, not looking out for the good of his people. Olunde then shows himself to be the most honorable and dutiful character of the play by doing what he knows he must do and killing himself to take Elesin's place as the king's horseman in the afterlife. While

this poses its own moral dilemmas (Olunde won't be able to go on and save lives as a doctor, for instance, nor will he be able to serve the next king as a horseman), taking Elesin's place means that Olunde is at least attempting to rebalance the cosmic order of the entire world and perform his duty by being willing to properly complete the task set out before him that benefits many, not just himself.

COLONIALISM

In the introduction to the play, Soyinka says outright that it's inappropriate and reductive to consider *Death and the King's Horseman* only as a play about a "clash of cultures" and the role of colonialism in Nigeria. Instead, he encourages readers and prospective directors to focus on the conflict that Elesin experiences as he fails to follow through with his suicide for a host of other reasons *not* related to Pilkings's attempts to stop him. Despite this warning, the fact remains that colonialism, racism, and prejudice loom large over the story, if only because it takes place in colonial Nigeria during World War Two. When considered in terms of colonialism, the action of *Death and the King's Horseman* becomes less about one man's failure to uphold his society's traditions and maintain cosmic order—instead, Elesin and Olunde's deaths come to symbolize the death of the Yoruba society as a whole under colonial rule.

It becomes clear in the side comments and observations of all characters, Yoruba and English alike, that the city of Oyo has a long and tragic history of European occupation that, even in the play's present, influences all the characters. When Pilkings arrests and imprisons Elesin, for example, Elesin is **chained** in a cellar where slaves bound for North America were once held. Though he's not taken to North America like his forebears, Elesin suffers at the hands of white invaders who wish to maintain control over African bodies and customs by imprisoning them and denying them dignity and agency. In the same vein, much of Pilkings's distress when he learns about Elesin's upcoming suicide has to do with the fact that the prince is visiting the colony and, as far as the prince is aware, Nigeria is a rare calm and safe colonial state amidst the horrors of World War Two. In other words, it's absolutely essential for Pilkings to suppress local customs that might not go over well with the colony's prince in order to maintain the illusion that after nearly a century of occupation, the locals are subdued and are no longer a threat to their occupiers—even when those "threats" don't threaten Pilkings directly or, for that matter, the presence or ruling power of the English as a group.

There are indicators, however, that despite the generations of English occupation in Nigeria, the English are only barely suppressing what Pilkings, at least, sees as an even greater threat than violence, revolt, or losing administrative power: the local culture and belief system. Though Amusa, a Nigerian man, converted to Islam and is now a sergeant serving under Pilkings, he cannot bear to look at Pilkings and Jane when he finds them wearing the egungun in preparation for the costume ball to be held that night in the prince's honor. He attempts to explain to Pilkings that it's wildly inappropriate for them to wear the egungun and, further, that it's disrespectful even for Amusa to touch or look at the costumes when discussing a matter related to death. What's most galling for Pilkings in this situation is that, as far as he's concerned, Amusa was supposed to have left his respect and belief for "any mumbo-jumbo" behind when he converted to Islam. This reveals that Pilkings's true goal is to stamp out the local culture and belief systems.

While Elesin and Pilkings seem to represent two ends of a spectrum, Elesin's son Olunde, who is in the process of training to be a doctor in England, represents the potential for a middle ground. When Olunde arrives, Pilkings is initially thrilled, as he thinks that Olunde will be a "voice of reason" who can "talk sense" into Elesin and stop his ritual suicide. Despite four years of life and training in England, however, Olunde calmly explains that he only returned to Nigeria to bury his father. He explains that the ritual will go on, no matter what anyone says to the contrary, and furthermore, that it's essential that it happen. This suggests that, like Amusa, Olunde still respects and understands the belief system he grew up with, even as he steps firmly into the Western world by training as a doctor. His time in England doesn't compromise his knowledge that upon his father's death, he needs to bury his father and perform rituals reserved for a firstborn son. Olunde's suicide after Elesin's failure then becomes indicative of Olunde's belief in the importance of maintaining these traditions and making sure that, at least in the cosmic realm, the culture persists properly. The fact that both Olunde and Elesin die, however (and especially that Olunde dies without ever becoming the king's horseman in an official capacity, and without leaving behind children of his own), makes it so that the custom cannot continue into the next generation. Through Olunde's insights into both Yoruba and English culture, the play suggests that there's massive potential for cross-cultural understanding through education and a desire to learn—while through his death, the play drives home the massive human and cultural consequences of elevating the beliefs of the colonizers over those of the colonized, a cost that harms everyone in the long run.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

EUROPEAN MUSIC

In his stage notes, Soyinka describes the European music (like a tango or waltz) that plays at points

throughout the production as being weak and of poor quality. With this, the play suggests that the music itself is representative of British colonialism in Nigeria—in that the English themselves are out of place, weak, and inappropriate in Nigeria. The vitality of the Yoruba drumming and singing, in contrast, suggests that the native music—and by extension, the native culture—is correct and appropriate for the locale, lending it its natural strength.

CHAINS

Though Soyinka insists in his introduction that *Death and the King's Horseman* isn't about colonialism, per se, the way that chains function throughout the play make it clear that Oyo and Nigeria as a whole is steeped in its colonial history, as well as its slave history. When Elesin is chained and kept in a cellar that once housed slaves before they were moved to the coast, it suggests that Elesin and his culture are still at the mercy of a system that seeks to dehumanize African people and deprive them of their traditions. As Elesin goes on to kill himself with his chains, it more broadly symbolizes the way in which the English colonizers are, at this time, literally killing native people and the culture by drawing on beliefs of European and white superiority developed through enslaving African people.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Norton edition of *Death and the King's Horsemen* published in 1975.

Act 1 Quotes

Praise-Singer: They love to spoil you but beware. The hands of women also weaken the unwary.

Elesin: This night I'll lay my head upon their lap and go to sleep. This night I'll touch feet with their feet in a dance that is no longer of this earth. But the smell of their flesh, their sweat, the smell of indigo on their cloth, this is the last air I wish to breathe as I go to meet my great forebears.

Related Characters: Elesin, The Praise-Singer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

As Elesin hurries to the market, pursued by his praise-singer and his drummer, the praise-singer cautions Elesin to be careful around the women, as they might weaken his resolve to die. Elesin's response shows just how much he loves life and specifically, how much he loves the life he can lead in the market, surrounded by women who adore him. The way he describes women in terms of their bodies and their smells shows how connected to the material, living world he is. All of this suggests that the praise-singer has every right to be concerned that the women will weaken Elesin's resolve to die. This tells the reader or audience that while Elesin may speak of one thing, it's important to pay attention to what the praise singer (and later in the play, Iyaloja) say about him, as they're the ones with an outside perspective.

Ah, companions of this living world
What a thing it is, that even those
We call immortal
Should fear to die.

Related Characters: Elesin (speaker), The Praise-Singer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

When Elesin dances and tells the story of the Not-I bird, he says that the bird (who flies around reminding people of their deaths) even visited the gods—and they too pretended not to hear the bird's call. Recognizing that everyone, even the gods who dictate the custom of Elesin's death, fears death suggests that Elesin's later failure to die is actually far very understandable, even within the context of his own spiritual beliefs. Because Elesin is so happily dancing and performing at this moment, it also suggests that the reader or viewer shouldn't necessarily take what he's saying at face value. While he may be able to speak about the necessity and the honor of greeting death, his obvious love of life suggests that his conversation with the Not-I bird may have actually gone more like this one between the gods and the bird.

Praise-Singer: I say you are that man who
Chanced upon the calabash of honour
You thought it was palm wine and
Drained its contents to the final drop.

Elesin: Life has an end. A life that will outlive
Fame and friendship begs another name.
What elder takes his tongue to his plate,
Licks it clean of every crumb? He will encounter
Silence when he calls on children to fulfill
The smallest errand! Life is honour.
It ends when honour ends.

Related Characters: The Praise-Singer, Elesin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Elesin and the women in the marketplace sing and dance about how honorable and good Elesin is, and Elesin remarks that part of his honorable life must include his honorable death. As a cultural note, it's the custom in the Yoruba society for men and important people like Elesin to get to eat first and get the pick of the best foodstuffs. They then leave their leftovers for others (in this case, children), and leaving desirable bits of food means that the individuals who get to eat off of Elesin's plate will remain loyal to him. Through this proverb, Elesin is able to remind the women of the marketplace just how honorable he is—he, presumably, leaves things on his plate that are good and desirable to eat. This is one way he can give back to his community; the other is by dying tonight at the appropriate time, which will ensure the spiritual wellbeing of his people.

Act 2 Quotes

Pilkings: Nonsense, he's a Moslem. Come on, Amusa, you don't believe in all this nonsense do you? I thought you were a good Moslem.

Amusa: Mista Pirinkin, I beg you sir, what you think you do with that dress? It belong to dead cult, not for human being.

Pilkings: Oh Amusa, what a let down you are. I swear by you at the club you know—thank God for Amusa, he doesn't believe in any mumbo-jumbo. And now look at you!

Related Characters: Sergeant Amusa, Simon Pilkings (speaker), Jane Pilkings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Amusa refuses to look at Pilkings and Jane while they're wearing the egungun costume, and Pilkings can't believe that Amusa would behave this way, given that he's a convert to Islam. Amusa's feelings suggest that Pilkings isn't doing as good a job of destroying the cultural history of colonial Nigeria as he'd like to think. His discomfort signals that for him, the egungun costumes do still have power and are deserving of respect, even if he no longer formally practices the religion or believes in their power. Pilkings's inability to understand how Amusa could be so disturbed by the costumes speaks to the way that Pilkings conceptualizes the native people as simple, primitive, and incapable of believing or respecting multiple things at once—regardless of their stated religion. It also shows how little Pilkings thinks of the local religion, given that he's doing something extremely rude and improper by wearing the egungun in the first place.

Jane: But Simon, do they really give anything away? I mean, anything that really counts. This affair for instance, we didn't know they still practised the custom did we?

Pilkings: Ye-e-es, I suppose you're right there. Sly, devious bastards.

Related Characters: Jane Pilkings, Simon Pilkings (speaker), Elesin, Sergeant Amusa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

Pilkings and Jane discuss how private the native people are about their customs, even though they're talkative about all manner of other things. The way that Jane and Pilkings frame this conversation shows that they have little understanding of the way that their presence as powerful colonizers shapes the way that the natives engage with them. As far as the native people are likely concerned, sharing their customs with their colonizers is useless at best (given the way that Pilkings so rudely and callously wears the egungun costume, for example) and dangerous at worst, since Pilkings later goes on to try to stop Elesin and the Yoruba from following through with the custom at all. This all suggests that Pilkings believes that his colonial goals are

being achieved far more effectively than they actually are, given that the natives are still practicing these old customs that don't support colonial rule at all.

Jane: Simon, you really must watch your language. Bastard isn't just a simple swear-word in these parts, you know.

Pilkings: Look, just when did you become a social anthropologist, that's what I'd like to know.

Jane: I'm not claiming to know anything. I just happen to have overheard quarrels among the servants. That's how I know they consider it a smear.

Related Characters: Jane Pilkings, Simon Pilkings (speaker), Joseph

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Following Pilkings's use of "bastard" to describe the natives, Joseph, the houseboy, is extremely offended, and Jane attempts to explain that "bastard" means something really awful to the locals. The way that Pilkings puts down Jane suggests that he doesn't think highly of her, or anyone else, for that matter. Because her knowledge doesn't come from him, it's not worthwhile or useful to him—instead, it's threatening. The fact that Jane is aware of the weight that the word "bastard" holds in Yoruba society shows that she's far more interested in learning about the locals than her husband is. She recognizes that in order to more effectively live with them (and eventually, to "properly" colonize them and likely stamp out this sort of thing), it's important to understand where the native people are coming from so they can relate to them better.

Act 3 Quotes

Amusa: The chief who call himself Elesin Oba.

Woman: You ignorant man. It is not he who calls himself Elesin Oba, it is his blood that says it. As it called out to his father before him and will to his son after him. And that is in spite of everything your white man can do.

Related Characters: Sergeant Amusa (speaker), Elesin, Iyaloja

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

When Amusa comes to the market to arrest Elesin, he makes the mistake of suggesting that Elesin calls *himself* by his name, rather than understanding that Elesin's name is passed down through generations of horsemen and is something that's innate to him. This shows how out of touch Amusa is with his home culture and specifically, how a lack of understanding makes it even more difficult for Amusa to negotiate with the market women and get any closer to getting his way.

The woman who responds, though unnamed, shows that she and the other women in the market can tap into a great deal of power by invoking the authority of their culture and its customs. She also shows that though Amusa is black, like her, he's a lesser being in her eyes because he chooses to serve the white colonizers. In her mind, she and the women are far stronger than he is because they still serve the spiritual systems that give them power, rather than the white people who wish to take their power away.

- One might even say, difficult?
- Indeed one might be tempted to say, difficult.
- But you do manage to cope?
- Yes indeed I do. I have a rather faithful ox called Amusa.
- He's loyal?
- Absolutely.
- Lay down his life for you what?
- Without a moment's thought.
- Had one like that once. Trust him with my life.
- Mostly of course they are liars.
- Never known a native to tell the truth.

Related Characters: Elesin, Iyaloja, Sergeant Amusa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, two young girls affect posh English accents and make fun of the English colonizers and Amusa specifically. By stealing Amusa's hat and baton and then decimating him with their act, the girls show that they are a force to be reckoned with and are the Yoruba's best bet to

fight the colonizers. They show here that they have a nuanced grasp of how the colonizers operate and how they think of the native Africans—referring to Amusa as a "faithful ox" indicates that they understand that the colonizers don't think of them as real people and instead, consider them either animals to do their bidding or crafty liars intent on double-crossing them. By standing up to Amusa like this, the girls also make it so that Elesin is able to follow through with the marriage ceremonies and go on to the death ceremonies without interruption. This indicates that though they're young, these girls are the keepers of the culture just like their mothers and Iyaloja are.

Then tell him to leave this market. This is the home of our mothers. We don't want the eater of white left-overs at the feast their hands have prepared.

Related Characters: Iyaloja, Sergeant Amusa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

As Iyaloja tries to get the girls to leave Amusa alone, the girls tell Iyaloja to kick Amusa out of the market. The way that the girls speak about the market suggests that it's a realm devoted to women, where women are the ones in power. This tells the reader that at least in this specific setting within Yoruba society, women do have power, just not in the Western sense of the word. Further, by turning Amusa out of the market, they ensure that their world will be able to proceed like it's supposed to (that is, with Elesin's death).

When the girls refer to Amusa as the "eater of white left-overs," it again shows that they think little of people like Amusa, who abandoned traditional society in favor of supporting colonial rule. Men like Amusa, they suggest, are the lowest of the low in colonial society, as they only get to eat leftovers and will never have any power of their own.

Our marriage is not yet wholly fulfilled. When earth and passage wed, the consummation is complete only when there are grains of earth on the eyelids of passage. Stay by me till then. My faithful drummers, do me your last service. This is where I have chosen to do my leave-taking, in this heart of life, this hive which contains the swarm of the world in its small compass. This is where I have known love and laughter away from the palace.

Related Characters: Elesin (speaker), Olunde, The Bride / The Young Woman, Iyaloja

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Following the marriage ceremonies, Elesin tells the bride that she's the one who will perform the final rites when he dies, and that he'd like to die here, in the market. Note how the Yoruba people think of the market: namely, that it's the center of society and can act as a metaphor for their conception of the world as a whole. Elesin wants to die in the center of the world, in a place where he's been happy and surrounded by women throughout his life. He also tells the bride that it's extremely important that she follow through with her duty of performing the final rites over his body, as this is the only way that their marriage will be complete. This reminds the reader that the bride is, alongside Olunde, one of the most dutiful characters in the play. While she doesn't speak, she does whatever's asked of her without question, likely in the awareness that only through doing so will her society continue to prosper.

But will they know you over there? Have they eyes to gauge your worth, have they the heart to love you, will they know what thoroughbred prances towards them in caparisons of honor? If they do not Elesin, if any there cuts your yam with a small knife, or pours you wine in a small calabash, turn back and return to welcoming hands.

Related Characters: The Praise-Singer (speaker), Elesin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

As Elesin dances deeper into a trance and closer to death, the praise-singer emotionally assures Elesin that if things aren't good on the other side, he can come back and the

praise-singer will welcome him back to the land of the living. The fact that the praise-singer is able to express this doubt about what life is like on the other side shows that questioning what death actually entails is a part of the Yoruba belief system. It also suggests that while the world of the living and the land of the dead are connected, it's possible that there are gaps in the communication between the two—hence the praise-singer wondering if those on the other side will understand just how honorable Elesin is.

Act 4 Quotes

Resident: You should have kept me informed Pilkings. You realise how disastrous it would have been if things had erupted while His Highness was here.

Pilkings: I wasn't aware of the whole business until tonight sir.

Resident: Nose to the ground Pilkings, nose to the ground. If we all let these little things slip past us where would the empire be eh? Tell me that. Where would we all be?

Related Characters: Simon Pilkings, The Resident (speaker), The Prince, Elesin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

After the resident pulls Pilkings out of the ball to give him Amusa's note regarding Elesin's suicide, the resident reprimands Pilkings for not being more tuned into what's going on with the natives. The fact that Pilkings didn't know about Elesin's suicide shows, first of all, that he doesn't much care about the native people or their culture, and likely wouldn't have taken much interest in Elesin's suicide were the prince not around to be aware of this. In other words, Pilkings only performs his duty to the empire when it's convenient for him and when it would make him look good. The resident, on the other hand, shows that he's extremely committed to stamping out the local culture and doing whatever he can to make sure that he knows about local rituals happening so that he can stop them. He believes that this is the only way to help England achieve its goals as a colonial power.

Olunde (mildly): And that is the good cause for which you desecrate an ancestral mask?

Jane: Oh, so you are shocked after all. How disappointing.

Olunde: No I am not shocked Mrs. Pilkings. You forget that I have now spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand.

Related Characters: Jane Pilkings, Olunde (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

At the ball, Olunde and Jane discuss that Olunde does find it offensive that Jane is wearing the egungun costume, which disappoints Jane. Jane's disappointment indicates that she believes Olunde's four years in England should've changed his thinking so that he wouldn't find wearing the egungun offensive. Instead, four years in England gave Olunde more insight into English culture, which, as far as he's concerned, doesn't respect anything that it didn't come up with or promote in the first place. In other words, Jane's rudeness comes from believing that her culture is superior, full stop, and not recognizing that there are other people in the world who believe differently and whose beliefs are just as important to them as hers are to her. This also shows that Jane has the capacity to understand, if she wanted to learn. Instead, however, Jane has chosen to be ignorant, which keeps her from being able to respect anything other than Western and English culture and religion.

Olunde: I don't find it morbid at all. I find it rather inspiring. It is an affirmative commentary on life.

Jane: What is?

Olunde: The captain's self-sacrifice.

Jane: Nonsense. Life should never be thrown deliberately away.

Olunde: And the innocent people round the harbour?

Jane: Oh, how does anyone know? The whole thing was probably exaggerated anyway.

Olunde: That was a risk the captain couldn't take.

Related Characters: Jane Pilkings, Olunde (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Jane and Olunde discuss a local ship's captain whose ship became somehow dangerous to the people surrounding the harbor. He blew up his ship and himself with it to save others, which Olunde finds inspiring and Jane finds repulsive. This exchange clearly illustrates how Jane and Olunde's respective cultures think of death and individuals' duty to keeping the masses safe. While Jane might accept that the captain saved many people, she's nevertheless unable to conceive of a situation in which it's acceptable for one person to kill themselves to save others. When she becomes dismissive of Olunde and the situation, it shows how uncomfortable she is voicing her opinions and trying to understand.

How can I make you understand? He *has* protection. No one can undertake what he does tonight without the deepest protection the mind can conceive. What can you offer him in place of his peace of mind, in place of the honour and veneration of his own people? What you think of your Prince if he had refused to accept the risk of losing his life on this voyage? This...showing-the-flag tour of colonial possessions.

Related Characters: Olunde (speaker), The Prince, Elesin, Jane Pilkings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

When Jane suggests that Pilkings can protect Elesin and keep him from killing himself, Olunde assures her that Elesin has the protection of the Yoruba spiritual system and will be doing his people a favor by dying. Importantly, Olunde shows that what's most important to him and his culture when it comes to death is the fact that by dying properly, when they're supposed to, people like Elesin are able to die honorably and their memory will be cherished and honored by the living for generations. Not dying, Olunde suggests, would be cowardly. By bringing up that the prince of England is doing a similar thing by traveling around to the colonies to show the British flag, he tries to impress upon Jane that this idea isn't actually something that's unique to the Yoruba culture. Every leader must accept the possibility of death and not fear it, for that's the only way to gain the respect of the ruled and be an honorable ruler.

How can you be so callous! So unfeeling! You announce your father's own death like a surgeon looking down on some strange... stranger's body! You're a savage like all the rest.

Related Characters: Jane Pilkings (speaker), Elesin, Olunde

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

When Olunde listens to the drums and calmly explains that the change in the rhythm signifies Elesin's death, Jane screams that Olunde is a strange savage. Again, this speaks to the different ways that the English and the Yoruba think of death. As far as Jane believes, death is something bad to be feared—and it shouldn't be something that happens to someone on their terms. It's something fundamentally unknowable and uncontrollable. For the Yoruba, on the other hand, death is something that's accepted as a fact of life. Especially for someone like Elesin, who is supposed to commit ritual suicide, knowing that death will come at a specific time gives him and the rest of the community a sense of peace and agency. Jane's insistence that this belief makes Olunde a "savage" suggests that while she claims she wants to learn about the Yoruba, there are some things that are beyond her comprehension and that she'll never understand until she decides that her Western beliefs aren't the only ones with value.

Act 5 Quotes

Elesin: You did not save my life District Officer. You destroyed it.

Pilkings: Now come on...

Elesin: And not merely my life but the lives of many. The end of the night's work is not over. Neither this year nor the next will see it. If I wished you well, I would pray that you do not stay long enough on our land to see the disaster you have brought upon us.

Pilkings: Well, I did my duty as I saw fit. I have no regrets.

Related Characters: Simon Pilkings, Elesin (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Pilkings tries to talk to Elesin while he's in the cell, and Elesin explains that Pilkings did a horrendous thing by stopping his suicide, though Pilkings insists he just did his duty. The way that Elesin talks about the awful things to come is intended to show Pilkings that Elesin also had a duty to his people to die appropriately and at the right time. Through doing that, Elesin would've been able to guarantee his people's spiritual wellbeing, as well as their health in the land of the living. Because he was prevented, however, the world is now irrevocably off-kilter. Pilkings's refusal to accept Elesin's explanation shows that he still believes that his Western beliefs are the only ones that matter. In his mind, death isn't ever a good thing, and it's appropriate to try to stop someone from committing suicide.

❝ You did not fail in the main thing ghostly one. We know the roof covers the rafters, the cloth covers blemishes; who would have known that the white skin covered our future, preventing us from seeing the death our enemies had prepared for us. The world is set adrift and its inhabitants are lost. Around them, there is nothing but emptiness.

Related Characters: Elesin (speaker), Olunde, Simon Pilkings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Pilkings suggests that he failed in effectively stamping out the power of local culture, as evidenced by Olunde's insistence that he shouldn't have stopped Elesin's death, and Elesin explains that he believes Pilkings is wrong. In his explanation, he suggests that colonialism as a whole (the "white skin" that covers the future) is winning and has won, as evidenced by Elesin's failure to follow through with the ritual and commit suicide. Because of what colonialism has done, Elesin suggests, the entire world is ruined, and his people's lives are ruined as well. In other words, while Pilkings may not feel like he won as an individual, in the long run, he and his cause have won a decisive (though wholly destructive) victory.

❝ You were the final gift of the living to their emissary to the land of the ancestors, and perhaps your warmth and youth brought new insights of this world to me and turned my feet leaden on this side of the abyss. For I confess to you, daughter, 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. I would have shaken it off, already my foot had begun to lift but then, the white ghost entered and all was defiled.

Related Characters: Elesin (speaker), Simon Pilkings, The Bride / The Young Woman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

In a moment alone with the bride, Elesin tells her that while Pilkings certainly complicated things, it was mostly his own love of life that kept him from following through and killing himself as planned. In particular, he blames his bride—not for anything that she did specifically; mostly as a living symbol of all the good things in the world of the living—for tying him to life in such a way that made it impossible for him to be willing to let go. This gives Elesin the opportunity to insist to the reader or viewer that he's not the only one to blame for what happened to him: while the bride showed him all that he'd be missing after he went on, Pilkings made it impossible to finish his task.

❝ 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 his 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.

Related Characters: Elesin (speaker), Simon Pilkings, Iyaloja

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

When Iyaloja arrives in the cellar to speak to Elesin, Elesin tries to explain to her why he couldn't follow through and

kill himself. In front of Iyaloja, Elesin accepts full responsibility for what happened. While it's easy to read his mention of the "alien hand" as being a reference to Pilkings and colonialism more broadly, it can also be read as the "alien" thought that maybe, he doesn't want to die. Given his role as the king's horseman, it is foreign for Elesin to consider that maybe he doesn't want to die and follow through with the ritual. When he mentions that his failure turned him into an infant, it represents how powerless Elesin now is since he wasn't able to follow through. Because he wasn't able to die honorably, Elesin is now a scorned figure, rather than a beloved and revered one.

Elesin: Go to the gates, ghostly one. Whatever you find there, bring it to me.

Iyaloja: Not yet. It drags behind me on the slow, weary feet of women. Slow as it is, Elesin, it has long overtaken you. It rides ahead of your laggard will.

Related Characters: Iyaloja, Elesin (speaker), Olunde, Simon Pilkings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

When Elesin asks Pilkings to bring in whatever is waiting at the gates for him, Iyaloja explains that the "burden" that's coming is coming on the backs of women and isn't here yet. The fact that this burden comes because of women firmly situates women as the keepers of tradition and culture. They are the ones who did, in this case, presumably make sure that someone (in this case, Olunde) followed through with the ritual suicide, and now, they're going to bring Olunde's body to Elesin so that he can perform the final rites over it. The women are the ones who are tasked with making sure that others in society behave appropriately—and as the ones left behind when Elesin and Olunde die, they also must suffer the consequences because Elesin didn't follow tradition.

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. There is your board, filled to overflowing. Feast on it.

Related Characters: Iyaloja (speaker), Olunde, Elesin, Simon Pilkings

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

In response to Pilkings asking if she wanted both Elesin and Olunde dead, Iyaloja explains that this is what happens when Pilkings, as a white colonist, messes with other people's lives and expects things to go smoothly. Here, she skewers his unwillingness to take the local culture seriously and blames his illiteracy in the Yoruba culture for the tragedy that took place. She also suggests that because Pilkings does things like this, he's asking for problems and trouble—it's a natural consequence of feeling that he's above the people he's attempting to colonize, and of thinking that his way is the only way to do things.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

As the market is closing up for the day, Elesin dances through it and sings, accompanied by drummers and his praise-singer. The praise-singer teases Elesin about racing too quickly toward the women in the market and forgetting the people who already know and love him, but Elesin insists that he loves the market and needs to be among the women there. Laughing, the praise-singer points out that this is a special day for Elesin, and maybe he shouldn't be running for the women in the market. He asks if Elesin is certain that there will be someone as skilled as he is at singing Elesin's praises in the afterlife and says that if Elesin needs him to come too, he'll follow.

Given the way that Elesin acts and dances so happily through the market, it's clear that he loves life and specifically, loves women and the market. Keep in mind that in the Yoruba belief system, the market is a metaphor for the center of the world. This shows that Elesin wants to be in the middle of the living world—and by extension, among the women who are there and who, biologically, are responsible for creating life.

Elesin assures the praise-singer that he doesn't need him to accompany him to the afterlife; instead, the praise-singer needs to remain in this world so he can sing about Elesin for those who are still alive. Elesin again praises the market, where the women dote on him and spoil him with fine fabrics and food. The praise-singer warns Elesin that if he's not careful, the women might weaken his resolve to die, but Elesin says that he wants to die having danced with the women and smelled the smells of the marketplace.

The conversation between Elesin and the praise-singer tells the reader that Elesin is going to die later on in the play. This is Elesin's last hurrah, and because he loves life, women, and the market so much, he wants to spend his last hours there with them. The way he speaks about the women shows that he's a beloved figure to them as well.

Elesin and his praise-singer discuss that the world has never "wrenched from its true course," despite the city's history of destruction and of "white slavers" that brought damage to Elesin's people. The praise-singer, through this, seeks to encourage Elesin to do what he's supposed to do and die later. Elesin tells his praise-singer that the "Not-I bird" has been calling around. According to Elesin, who dances and sings the story of the bird, the Not-I bird flies around to people, telling them that death is getting close, and everyone--animals included—says "not I" and pretends to not hear the bird. Even the immortal gods are afraid of this bird. As Elesin performs, more women enter to watch him, including Iyaloja, the "mother of the market." Iyaloja asks how Elesin feels about the Not-I bird, and Elesin says that when the bird came to him, he invited it inside and then sent it home, happy.

Elesin and the praise-singer note that colonialism and slavery have done horrible things to their culture and their ancestors, but they insist that the world is still pretty much in balance. This suggests that they possibly underestimate the destructive power of colonialism at this point. Given the way that Elesin talks about the Not-I bird, he gives the impression that he and he alone isn't afraid of death. With this, he shows that he accepts that it's his duty to die and welcome the bird. His performance is boastful but also shows his general exuberance and popularity.

The women in the market and the praise-singer ask Elesin if there's anything that will keep him from dying, but Elesin assures them that when the time comes, he'll eagerly dance toward death to go keep the king company in the afterlife. He says that in life, he and the king were close and spent all their time together, enjoying the best things the world had to offer. The praise-singer says that Elesin came upon "the calabash of honor" and, thinking it was wine, drank the entire thing. Elesin again says that he's honorable and will take care of his people by behaving honorably.

It's important that there's this call-and-response exchange between Elesin and the praise-singer and the market women. This allows them to demonstrate that Elesin's death isn't something personal to him; instead, it's something that they all have a stake in. Notice too how the praise-singer speaks about how honorable Elesin is. This gives the reader evidence for why they should take Elesin seriously when he says he's going to die as planned.

When the women tell Elesin that he's a man of honor, however, Elesin tells them to stop. The women worry that they offended Elesin, and Elesin confirms that he's extremely offended. Nervously, Iyaloja asks for Elesin to forgive them and tell them what they did wrong. Iyaloja and the women kneel and beg Elesin to correct them as Elesin asks if his body should "be taken for a vagrant's." The women are still baffled, and the praise-singer tells Elesin to tell them what they need to do. Elesin says that a man of honor shouldn't be wearing the clothes he's wearing, and he laughs. The women run to fetch rich clothing from their market stalls.

Playing this joke on the women isn't especially nice, but it again establishes Elesin as a beloved figure among the women at the market. They want to please him and make him happy, and it never occurs to them that Elesin might actually be the one at fault here. This does show that Elesin (and men more broadly) have more power than women in terms of action in the play, while women must do what they can to keep men happy and satisfied.

The women dress Elesin in the rich clothing and again ask for forgiveness. Elesin insists that since he loves all the women so much, he has to forgive them for anything and everything. The women and Iyaloja dance and sing that they feared that they'd upset the balance of the universe by offending Elesin on this great day. When Elesin is fully dressed, he stands surrounded by the dancing women. As he catches sight of something offstage, he says that the world is good. The women respond that they know he'll leave the world in a good place. Elesin says that he cannot disconnect himself from his roots, even though he can't actually see the "navel of the world."

Just as the women have a responsibility to make Elesin happy, Elesin understands that he must return the favor and make the women happy if he wants to keep the world in order. This begins to show that there's a symbiotic relationship between the men and women in Elesin's society, and everyone has a role to play in order to make the society function properly. Notice too that offending someone means upending the entire universe. This sets up the stakes for not behaving properly—it would be catastrophic.

The distraction that caught Elesin's eye—a beautiful young woman—walks into the market. Elesin says that the world is creating a fantastic farewell for him, unless he's already dead. He asks the surrounding women and the praise-singer if he's still in the market, or if he's gone. The praise-singer is concerned by these questions and assures Elesin that he's still the one speaking to him, not departed praise-singers in heaven.

Here, Elesin's musings about the bride show that women are powerful in ways not necessarily connected to their actions—the bride has the power, through her beauty, to make Elesin question if she's of a different world.

Elesin points out that as the horseman of the king, he had access to any woman he wanted. He notes that people would say that if they hid a beautiful woman in a tree, he'd choose *that* tree to camp under. The praise-singer says that Elesin certainly has a reputation. He reminisces about the time that they caught Elesin with his bride's sister, and Elesin insisted that he was honoring her like a "grateful in-law." The praise-singer praises Elesin's virility and reputation with the women, but Elesin stops him and asks who the young woman is whom he saw enter the market.

By establishing Elesin's reputation as a ladies' man, the praise-singer and Elesin continue to make it clear that Elesin's love of life is rooted primarily in his desire for carnal pleasures. Notice, however, that this isn't portrayed as a bad thing, even when Elesin does something that seems uncouth (like sleeping with his sister-in-law). Instead, it's what gives him a good reputation with women.

Elesin describes how beautiful the young woman's body is and again asks who she is. Hesitantly, Iyaloja tries to speak. She agrees that Elesin is still alive and therefore able to notice beautiful women, but she says that the woman is already engaged. Annoyed, Elesin asks why Iyaloja had to share this information with him. Iyaloja says that this day belongs to Elesin, but suggests that Elesin should want to be remembered by what he leaves. Elesin agrees with this and says that it's only through memory that people can defeat death, but suggests that he'd like to "travel light" and leave behind something that will benefit all of those still living. The women tell Elesin he's honorable, and Elesin replies that since he's so honorable, he needs to marry this young woman.

What Elesin is referring to, in a roundabout way, is that he'd like to have sex with the bride and conceive a child with her to leave behind after he dies. This suggests that this child would be one other way that the people still living could remember Elesin, alongside the memories of his honor. His annoyance when Iyaloja shares that the bride is engaged shows that while Elesin may talk the talk about doing what's right for his community, he also has a selfish streak and wants to get his way, regardless of the cost.

Iyaloja points out that Elesin, in his honor, doesn't ruin other people's happiness for his own pleasure. Elesin, however, says that the women are trying to stop him from one final pleasure. He says he'd like to "travel light" by having sex with the young woman and allowing their child to stay behind. Iyaloja turns to the women and says that since Elesin is already so close to death, she can't refuse him. They remind Iyaloja that the bride is already engaged to Iyaloja's own son, but Iyaloja says she can't ruin Elesin's final day for him. In order to keep the world in order, she cannot let Elesin die with regrets.

By leveraging the fact that Elesin is preparing to die for his people and do them a massive favor (his death will keep the cosmic order in line), Elesin is able to get Iyaloja to allow him to marry the bride. This shows that in addition to getting extra privileges just because he's the king's horseman, Elesin also gets special treatment because of the sacrificial service he's going to perform for his people.

Elesin asks if the women have come to a decision, and Iyaloja answers that they have: Elesin can have the young woman. She points out, however, that Elesin should take care to not leave a curse. This offends Elesin a little, and he becomes even more exasperated when Iyaloja says that they need to go prepare both his bridal chamber and his burial shrouds. He recovers and asks that his young bride perform the final rites after he dies. The women leave and return with the woman.

When Elesin seems to startle at Iyaloja's mention of the burial shrouds, it suggests that he's actually not as keen on dying as he's previously pretended to be. He's far more interested in having sex with his bride than he is in dying—something that, on a grander scale, suggests that Elesin is more interested in the pleasures of life than he is in an honorable death.

ACT 2

At the district officer Simon Pilkings's home, Pilkings and his wife, Jane, are **tangoing** through their living room, dressed in egungun costumes. As they dance, a native policeman, Amusa, comes to the door and peeks in the window. At first he looks confused, but then he looks horrified, leaps backward, and knocks over a flowerpot. While Jane turns off the music, Pilkings goes to the door and finds Amusa, stammering and pointing at the costumes. Pilkings isn't sure what's wrong with Amusa, but when Amusa also points with horror at Jane, she suggests that their costumes are upsetting him. Pilkings and Jane take off their masks, and Jane remarks that they've shocked Amusa's "big pagan heart." Pilkings insists that Amusa is a Muslim and shouldn't be shocked, but Amusa insists that the egungun costumes are for the cult of the dead, not living humans.

While no one indicates how long it's been since Amusa converted to Islam, it's clearly not been so long that Amusa has forgotten that the egungun are powerful and revered costumes in Yoruba society. This suggests British colonialism is failing at its goal of stamping out the local culture and belief systems and replacing them with culture and religion more palatable to European colonizers. The colonizers have great political power over the native people, but they cannot entirely control their thoughts and beliefs. Jane's comment that Amusa still has a "pagan heart" shows that she's derisive of the local culture just like her husband (and despite being more understanding than he is).

Pilkings is very disappointed by Amusa's explanation and says that he didn't think Amusa believed in any "mumbo-jumbo." Amusa continues to ask Pilkings to take off the costume, but Pilkings stubbornly insists that Amusa state why he came to see him. He also shares that he and Jane believe that they'll win first prize at their costume party later with their costumes. Jane realizes that Amusa is serious and encourages Pilkings to be careful, but Pilkings reminds Amusa that he's a police officer and might face consequences if he doesn't follow orders and state his business. Amusa says that he came to discuss a matter of death, and he can't speak about death to a "person in uniform of death." He remains silent, even when Pilkings yells at him.

Remember that the egungun are extremely important to the Yoruba religion—they're how the living communicate with the spirits of their ancestors. By wearing these important costumes to a costume party, Pilkings shows the natives that he doesn't care at all about the local belief systems and indeed, thinks that they're something that he can use to get ahead in his own life. In other words, this is just one way that Pilkings is profiting from the people he's oppressing here. And not only is this exploitative, but it's also extremely disrespectful.

Jane tries to reason with Amusa and points out that he helped arrest the egungun cult leaders in town. She asks why he's only worried about this now. Amusa explains that he arrested the *people* who were making trouble, but he didn't touch the egungun and must treat the egungun with respect. Annoyed, Pilkings says that there's nothing to be done when the natives get this way. He doesn't want to miss the costume ball, so he gives Amusa some paper to write his report and goes into the bedroom to get ready. After Jane and Pilkings are out of the room, Amusa begins to write. He listens to the drums coming from the town and almost calls for Pilkings, but decides to just leave his note and go.

Amusa's willingness to defy Pilkings and refuse to look at the egungun shows that he prioritizes these spiritual beliefs and customs over his duty to the British Crown, which he serves as a policeman under Pilkings. Differentiating between the beliefs and the people practicing them shows that while Amusa is a one-dimensional character in Pilkings's eyes, he sees the world in a nuanced way and must navigate divided loyalties.

After Amusa leaves, Pilkings emerges, reads his note, and immediately calls for Jane. The note reads that tonight, Elesin plans to "commit death" per native custom, which is a criminal offense. Pilkings and Jane reason that this must be a ritual murder, and Pilkings laments that it seems like the native customs keep emerging, even when they think they've put a stop to most of them. Jane asks if they'll skip the ball because of this, but Pilkings says he'll just have Elesin arrested.

It's telling that Pilkings and Jane jump immediately to murder rather than suicide. This speaks to the way that they think about death within the context of their Christian religion and English culture. For them, death is something to be avoided at all cost, and not something that someone would accept willingly. Suicide is unthinkable to them, while murder is conceivable if horrendous.

Pilkings thinks that this may just be an unfounded rumor, but Jane points out that Amusa is usually pretty reliable. Pilkings says that Amusa is acting strange, though and seemed oddly scared earlier. With a laugh, Jane imitates Amusa's refusal to speak to Pilkings in the egungun costume. Pilkings decides to send the houseboy, Joseph, to the police station with instructions. Jane suggests that they talk to Elesin first to make sure that this is actually something to worry about, and Pilkings snaps at her. Then he apologizes and admits that the drumming in town is making him nervous. Pilkings wonders if the drums have anything to do with the "situation," and thinks that he hasn't heard drums that sound like this before.

Pilkings's observation that he hasn't heard the drums like this before indicates that as separate and distant from the natives as Pilkings would like to be, he's actually rather tuned into life in Nigeria. This reminds the reader that if Pilkings were to choose, he could be understanding and actually helpful, at least within the limits of the inherently harmful colonialist framework in which he exists. Instead, making fun of Amusa and referring to this as a "situation" shows Pilkings placing himself in a state of authority and deciding that the native culture must be suppressed.


Joseph knocks and Pilkings calls him in. Pilkings confirms that Joseph is a Christian and isn't bothered by the egungun costumes, and then asks what's going on in town. Joseph says that Elesin is going to kill himself, and explains to Jane that this is the law and custom: the king died a month ago and will be buried tonight, and Elesin must die to follow him to heaven. Pilkings sighs that he must be destined to clash with Elesin more than any other native. Three or four years ago, Pilkings helped get Elesin's son, Olunde, to England to study medicine. Elesin wanted Olunde to stay for some tradition Pilkings wasn't aware of, and Pilkings snuck Olunde onto a boat to get him out. Jane and Pilkings talk about how Olunde was intelligent, sensitive, and will make a great doctor.

When Joseph is able to share what's going on in town, it again shows that converting to another religion doesn't rob the native Nigerians of the memories of their past. Though Joseph doesn't react poorly to the egungun, note that he also doesn't seem to react at all or give any emotional response when he tells them that Elesin will kill himself. This suggests that though he's a Christian in some ways, Joseph still adheres to his native culture's beliefs surrounding death, and he doesn't see the suicide as an objectively awful thing.


Jane asks Pilkings and Joseph whether Olunde was Elesin's oldest son. Joseph says that Olunde was, and because of that, Olunde isn't supposed to leave. Jane confirms that the role of the horseman is passed down through family lines to the oldest son, and reasons that this is why Elesin didn't want Olunde to go. Pilkings says that knowing this, he's even happier that he got Olunde out, and he wonders if Olunde knew about the custom. They decide that Olunde didn't, but say that he was a private person. Pilkings says that the natives will talk about anything. Jane notes that they might talk, but don't talk about anything important. Pilkings declares that they're "devious bastards."

Jane seems to be more understanding and more in tune with the native culture than her husband is. Pilkings wonders whether or not Olunde knew about the custom that would make him the next horseman, never considering that Olunde might not have a problem with fulfilling this role. In his frustration, Pilkings lets his real feelings about the native population slip out.




Joseph stiffly excuses himself. Jane reprimands Pilkings, as "bastard" isn't just a swear word here—it's extremely offensive. Pilkings is unconcerned and says that with "elastic families," there aren't actually any bastards. The volume of the drumming increases, and Jane restlessly wonders if it's connected to the ritual. Pilkings shouts for Joseph to return and asks what the drumming is about. When Joseph says he doesn't know, Pilkings exasperatedly points out that two years of being a Christian and engaging with "holy water nonsense" isn't enough to erase "tribal memory." This shocks Joseph, and Jane takes over questioning. Joseph explains that he's honestly not sure what the drumming is about, since it sounds like a great chief is dying and then like a great chief is getting married. Annoyed, Pilkings sends Joseph back to the kitchen.

Again, Jane acts as an interpreter of the local sensibilities for Pilkings. However, Pilkings's dismissiveness of her suggests that he doesn't much care to listen to anyone he thinks is beneath him, including his wife. Calling holy water nonsense shows that Pilkings isn't just being rude about Yoruba religion—for him, all religion is silly and doesn't hold much sway for him. He's mostly interested in Christianity as a way of controlling and "Westernizing" the native population, not because of any real religious devotion.

Once Joseph is gone, Jane implores Pilkings to understand that insulting holy water in front of Joseph is like insulting the Virgin Mary in front of a Catholic. She believes that Joseph might resign over this, but Pilkings says he's more concerned about Elesin's death. Jane says she'll change and make supper, since they clearly need to miss the ball in order to deal with the disturbance. Pilkings deems this nonsense, as this is the first event in over a year and it's a special occasion. He insists that he's not responsible for monitoring potential suicides, and it'll be a good thing when Elesin is gone. Jane laughs and says that once Pilkings is done shouting and being upset, he'll stop the suicide.

When Jane insists that they stay home from the ball to deal with this, it suggests that she may be more interested in promoting the larger goals of colonialism than her husband is. Pilkings wants to have a good time and enjoy practical pleasures, while Jane feels that it's important to do things by the letter. Jane's choice to reprimand Pilkings also begins to show that it's possible to act as though every belief system has value and should be respected.

As Jane walks away to change, Pilkings shouts that he'll look extremely foolish if the drumming is just about a marriage and he interrupts Elesin on his honeymoon. He wonders what the native chiefs actually do on their honeymoons, scribbles something on a paper, and yells for Joseph. Joseph takes a minute, but appears in the doorway, looking sulky. He insists that he didn't hear Pilkings calling him. Pilkings tells Joseph to take the note to Amusa at the police station. As Joseph leaves, Pilkings grits his teeth and tells him that holy water isn't really nonsense.

While wondering what a traditional Yoruba honeymoon entails isn't entirely off base, given that traditions vary throughout the world, the way that Pilkings phrases this allows him to think that the Yoruba are so different as to be less than human. This turn means that he's able to think that their lives and their customs matter less than his.

Jane calls Pilkings for supper and asks how Joseph reacted when he said that the holy water isn't nonsense. Pilkings says it doesn't matter, though he's somewhat concerned that the local reverend is going to complain about the way that Pilkings talks about religion to the local converts. He tells Jane to put supper away and says that they can still go to the ball. Pilkings explains that that he's told Amusa to arrest Elesin and lock him up in his study, where nobody will dare start a fuss. As Jane leaves to put her costume back on, Pilkings tells her that he has a surprise for her: the prince is touring the colonies and will be at the ball. Jane is thrilled and says that luckily with her costume, she won't need to find gloves.

Pilkings only apologized about the holy water comment because he was worried what other colonists would think, not because he really feels bad about insulting Joseph's new faith. Given the way that the play conceptualizes duty on both sides of the cultural spectrum, it's likely that Pilkings's attempt to have the best of both worlds by arresting Elesin and going to the ball won't work out well for him. He's not fully committing to either, and is only trying to arrest Elesin at all because he knows it'd get him in trouble if he didn't do anything about it. He also suggests that the natives respect him enough to not try to break into his house, which is potentially an overestimation of the power he holds.

ACT 3

Back in the market, Amusa and two constables use their batons to push a large group of women backwards, toward a cloth stall covered in rich velvet. Amusa shouts at the women that he's here on official business, but the women call him a "white man's eunuch" and insist that he's not allowed here anymore. One woman tugs on a constable's baton and says that the police batons are useless; what counts is a man's penis. She makes as though to peer up the constable's baggy shorts, but he pulls his knees together and the women roar with laughter. The women insult the penises of all three men.

The way that the women taunt Amusa and the constables allows the reader to understand better why Elesin has such a good reputation with the women, despite seeming a bit too forward: men's ability to perform sexually is extremely important. The women suggest that when men go to work for the English, they suffer because they can no longer perform sexually. They are thus able to regain some agency under colonization by laughing at the colonizers and those who work with them.

Amusa tells the women to stop interfering, but the women insist that Amusa is trespassing, and that the road isn't meant for people like him. They ask for Amusa to have the white men come themselves. When Amusa says that they'll return with weapons, the women joke more about how the white men cut off their "weapons" (penises) before they put on the police shorts. Again, the women howl with laughter. Amusa shouts that he knows that "the chief who call himself Elesin" is in the market stall, and a woman shouts that Elesin's *blood* is why he's called Elesin--and furthermore, that Elesin's son will be called Elesin after him, no matter what the white men do.

Notice that it's the women who are trying—and succeeding—to protect Elesin from arrest. The Yoruba women demonstrate their power by invoking custom, as when one says that it's Elesin's bloodline that gives him his name. They also show a rowdy sense of humor despite their situation as a colonized people, again giving themselves a sense of power.

Amusa insists that this practice must stop, but the women spit back that Elesin will kill himself and in doing so, show that he's stronger than the laws of the white men. Iyaloja and Elesin's new bride come out of the stall and join the group outside. Amusa is glad to see Iyaloja, and explains that he's here to arrest Elesin. Iyaloja says that Elesin has a duty to his new bride, which shocks Amusa, as he didn't think that this was a wedding. Iyaloja points out that Amusa must surely have wives, and suggests that he go ask the white men what happens on a person's wedding night. Amusa continues to insist that this isn't a wedding, and one woman suggests that Amusa's wives are still waiting for Amusa to have sex with them.

Notice that the women here (correctly) say that the best way to beat the colonizers is to make sure that their own traditions can continue to take place. Amusa not knowing that this is a wedding (especially when Joseph knew there was a wedding going on) suggests that he's become more Western culturally than any of the other native characters, as he can no longer identify what's going on from the drumbeats he hears.

As Amusa implores Iyaloja to make the women stop insulting him, several girls push through the crowd to the front. They insult Amusa and reprimand him for insulting their mothers and intruding on the market. Iyaloja tries to calm the girls, but the girls insist they'll deal with Amusa. They snatch the constables' batons, knock off their hats, and again tell Iyaloja that they want to deal with Amusa, since he came to the market without an invitation. They point out that he doesn't go to the Residency without an invitation—he doesn't even go to the servants' quarters there, where servants "eat the leftovers."

Amusa understands that as the mother of the market, Iyaloja has a great deal of power over lots of people, including these women. When the girls step in to handle Amusa, it shows the women and the audience that it's these young women—who still understand the importance of their culture—who will make sure that it carries over into the future so forthcoming generations can benefit.

The girls adopt English accents and play-act as two Englishman at a party. They exchange hats and "politely" invite the other to sit down first. They discuss that the natives are okay, but then admit that the natives are restless and difficult. One girl says she has a "faithful ox" named Amusa, who's loyal and would lay down his life for her. They say that some natives are trustworthy, but all the natives are actually liars and don't tell the truth. The girls discuss the hot and humid weather, and then note that even here, there's golf at an exclusive club, as well as horseracing. They congratulate each other on properly serving England, mime offering each other whisky, and then one girl bellows "sergeant!" in a deep voice. Amusa says, "Yessir," and the women all laugh.

The fact that the girls can so effectively mimic the English and their affect shows that while they may be the future of the Yoruba, they're also very tuned into how the English act and behave. In other words, their understanding of the English is exactly what enables them to stand up to Amusa and throw insults at him that are extremely effective (and humorous). They also note that the English dehumanize them—even Amusa—which is one of the reasons why they have to lean on their customs: it's the only way to keep the culture and the people alive.

A girl tells Amusa to take his men and leave, and Amusa, thoroughly embarrassed, tries to threaten the girls. As the women and girls converge on Amusa and his constables, one girl says that they'll take his pants off. Iyaloja again asks the girls to leave Amusa alone, and one girl says that they'll leave him alone if he leaves. She says that Amusa doesn't belong here, as he now eats the leftovers of the white men. With a sigh, Iyaloja tells Amusa to leave. Amusa backs away, threatening the women as he goes. The women are in awe of the girls, and they begin an excited dance and song. They chant that their children will defend them.

In celebrating the girls, the women celebrate female power, wherever it comes from. This also offers some indication as to why Elesin is so caught up in having another child with his bride before he dies. By getting her pregnant, Elesin will be able to contribute to the future in a tangible way, giving his people another person to fight for their rights and their traditions.

Elesin steps out of the stall, holding a white velvet cloth. He cries out in happiness and Iyaloja steps up to take the cloth from him. He says that the mark on the cloth doesn't just prove that his bride was a virgin; it signifies the union of his death and of the future life of his child with the bride. The drums begin again in the distance, and Elesin perks up. He says that the king's dog is now dead, and the king's horse will follow soon. Elesin tells the bride that in order to fulfill their marriage, she needs to stay with him until he's dead, and that after he's dead, she should put earth on his closed eyes.

Notice that the young bride doesn't say anything throughout the play. In addition to female power as represented by Iyaloja and the other women in the market, the Yoruba also value dutiful women like the bride, who do nothing but what they're told to do by people like Elesin. Notably, by agreeing to marry Elesin and perform the final rites, the bride is being tasked with important rituals that will also insure the wellbeing of their people.

Elesin asks the women to stand by him, as he's decided he's going to die here. He wants to die in the market, where he's experienced the most happiness and love. He asks the women to listen to the drums, and after a moment, says that the king's horse will die soon. Bearers will carry the king's horse and dog through the town until they reach the market. Elesin's eyes begin to cloud over. He says that his spirit is ready to make the passage, but he asks that it wait a moment until the courier arrives.

Choosing to die in the market, which is the center of Yoruba life, shows that Elesin wishes to die right in the middle of what constitutes his earthy existence. His trance suggests that he's going to be successful in dying, despite his ties to the living, material world. By speaking with the women, Elesin also turns his death into a communal, rather than an individual, act.

Elesin says that while the horse is born to bear men, on this night, the horse triumphantly gets to ride on the backs of men into the afterlife. He says that no matter if he dies before or after the courier gets here, his soul will meet up with those of the horse, the dog, and the king in the afterlife. Elesin pauses to listen to the drums and seems to fall more deeply into a trance. He looks at the moon and says he's not sure when exactly he must die. He asks the women to dance with him one last time. Elesin descends the steps to join the women on the ground and begins to dance.

Again, everything about Elesin here indicates that he takes his death very seriously and will follow through with it, despite his connections to the world of the living. By asking the women to dance with him and help guide him to the afterlife, he continues to show that his death is a communal affair that benefits all of them. The women have a vested interest in helping him get to the afterlife.

The praise-singer asks Elesin if he can hear his voice and if Elesin's memory is still sound. Elesin asks the praise-singer what he needs to say, and the praise-singer says he wants to make sure that Elesin will die. Elesin assures the praise-singer that he cannot forget what he's supposed to do. The praise-singer tells Elesin that if he needs guidance, his dog will help Elesin get where he needs to go. Elesin says that his rich clothing won't bind him to the earth, and says that now, he's listening to strange voices that guide him. Elesin's trance seems to deepen as Iyaloja joins the praise-singer. She says that only Elesin can die "the unknowable death of death."

The praise-singer's cautions suggest that he's more concerned that Elesin won't follow through than Elesin is. Offering him all this help allows him to show Elesin that he isn't alone as he makes this journey. Despite knowing that he's dying and (in theory) where he's going, Iyaloja calling death "unknowable" shows that even within the logic of the Yoruba belief system, there are still questions, and it's okay to be concerned or curious about what death really entails.

The praise-singer again asks Elesin if Elesin can hear him, but Elesin seems deep in his trance. The praise-singer laments that Elesin is dying so quickly, and wonders if the marvels of the afterlife are what Elesin now hears and sees. He wonders if Elesin's head is getting darker, and says that he'd call Elesin back to the living if he could. He can't, however, as the cycles of life can't be stopped. The praise-singer asks if Elesin sees the "master of life" and the praise-singer's father, and he wonders if Elesin will remember him. Breaking down, the praise-singer wonders if on the other side, the ancestors know how honorable Elesin is and if they'll treat him properly. He says that if they don't, that Elesin can turn around and come back. Elesin continues to dance.

The praise-singer's words speak to the strong bond that these two men have formed over the course of their years together. While Elesin may be accepting of his death and the rest of the characters accept that Elesin must die, this doesn't mean that they can't grieve the passing of one of their good friends. The community still experiences a loss, even as they recognize that it's a good thing that will help them in the long run.

ACT 4

At the ball, which takes place at the Residency, couples around the room wait for the prince's arrival. The band begins to play, but their **music** is bad. The prince and the resident enter the room, the band laboriously plays a waltz, and the prince opens the dance floor. The couples dance and after a while, the prince sits in a corner. The resident brings couples over to introduce them to the prince, and finally, Pilkings and Jane approach the prince. The prince is fascinated by their egungun costumes, and Pilkings demonstrates how the natives dance when they wear the costumes. After a few minutes of this, a footman brings a note to the resident. The resident fetches Pilkings and leads him outside.

The music being so bad suggests that the colonizers aren't at home in Nigeria—everything seems uncomfortable and out of place. Pilkings, who dances in the egungun costumes, believes that he knows enough to show the prince how things work here—when in reality Pilkings doesn't, especially given that he's doing something awful by wearing the costume in the first place. His role as a colonizer, however, gives him the power to do what he wants with it.

The resident is concerned about the contents of the note, but Pilkings says that it's just a strange custom and, apparently, Elesin has to commit suicide because the king died. The resident is shocked, especially since the king died a month ago, but Pilkings says that the ceremonies last around 30 days. The resident is still confused—the notes says the market women are rioting. Pilkings admits that he's not sure what this has to do with the suicide, but he wonders if Amusa (who wrote the note) is exaggerating. Looking at the note again, the resident says that Amusa sounds desperate. He asks Jane to go find his aide-de-camp and Amusa.

The resident also lives in Nigeria; his implication that he also didn't know about these customs shows that none of the colonizers have a good grasp of the culture they're trying to suppress. It's at least easier for the native people to keep their customs alive when the colonizers don't know about them, however. In the same vein, Pilkings and the English aren't as successful as they think they are.

Sternly, the resident reprimands Pilkings for not informing him earlier about all of this. He says it'd be disastrous if things blew up while the prince is visiting. Pilkings admits that he didn't find out that this was going on until earlier tonight, but the resident tells Pilkings to be vigilant—they must be if they want the empire to succeed. Under his breath, Pilkings says that if he hadn't found out about this, they'd all be peacefully in bed, but assures the resident that he won't let this sort of thing slip past him again. The resident says he needs to go back to the prince and somehow explain his abrupt actions. Pilkings suggests he tell the prince the truth, which scandalizes the resident. The resident points out that this is supposed to be a safe and secure colony.

Pilkings's comment under his breath shows the reader that he really doesn't care about what's going on with Elesin. This is a big night for Pilkings, and he was enjoying entertaining the prince; Elesin's suicide is a mere annoyance for him. However, not stopping Elesin's suicide earlier is also making Pilkings look bad in front of the prince and the resident. This all suggests that Pilkings wants to have a good time and receive recognition, but he doesn't really want to put in the work.

Amusa and his constables arrive. The resident doesn't recognize them and asks if they're the ringleaders of the riot. When he learns that Amusa is a police officer, the resident notes that Amusa's uniform is missing "colorful sashes" and a "colorful fez" with pink tassels. Through his teeth, Pilkings tells Amusa to not act superstitious and threatens to feed him pork if he does. He also tells the resident that Amusa probably lost his hat in the riot. The resident thinks this is very funny, asks for a report in the morning, and wanders off. The aide-de-camp asks Pilkings if he needs help and shares that they have extra soldiers that came with the prince if Pilkings needs backup.

The resident's confusion as to who Amusa is betrays his racism—as far as he's concerned, all black people must be part of the riot, not part of the English colonial effort. Pilkings's threat to give Amusa pork shows that when it's convenient, Pilkings knows how to weaponize a person's religion and use it to get what he wants. This is cruel and patronizing, and indicates that Pilkings cares only for getting his way and not at all for the beliefs of others.

Once the aide-de-camp is gone, Pilkings turns to Amusa. Amusa starts to speak, but then stops and looks at the ceiling. Pilkings is angry, but Amusa repeats what he said earlier: he can't talk about death to the death cult (Pilkings is still wearing the egungun costume). Pilkings dismisses Amusa from duty for the evening and gets ready to leave himself. The clock strikes midnight and Pilkings stares at Jane with a look of horror. Jane seems nervous too, and says that the natives don't keep time like they do. Pilkings runs away, followed by the constables. Amusa tells Jane goodnight, but leaves without looking at her.

Jane's comment that the natives observe a different system of time may be true, but again, she says it in such a way as to make it seem that the native way of keeping time is more primitive and less correct, rather than just different. Amusa's continued stand against Pilkings shows Pilkings that it's going to take a lot more than having native policemen on the force to truly change the culture.

Jane stands awkwardly. A young black man appears and peers into the ballroom as though he's looking for someone. Jane recognizes him as Olunde. Olunde is thrilled once he recognizes Jane, and asks for Pilkings. Shocked to see Olunde, Jane says that he looks well. Olunde says that from what little he can see of her, Jane also looks well. She asks Olunde if he's shocked by the egungun. Olunde says he isn't, though he thinks it must be hot inside the costume. Jane replies that it is hot, but it's worth it to have the prince see it. Olunde suggests that seeing the prince isn't actually a great reason to "desecrate an ancestral mask," which makes Jane sigh in disappointment. Olunde says that after four years in England, he understands the English—they don't respect things that they don't understand.

Olunde speaks like a Westerner, making Jane feel comfortable at first, but this then allows him to clearly state that what Jane and her husband are doing is extremely disrespectful. Because Olunde can reach across the cultures like this, he becomes the character that tells the (Western) reader or audience the most about the Yoruba culture and their traditions in a way that they will find easier to understand.

Jane sighs that Olunde has returned with a chip on his shoulder, and she asks how Olunde found England. Olunde says that in many ways, he admires the English, especially for their courage in the war. Jane explains that in Nigeria the war feels remote, though there was recently some excitement: a captain blew up his ship in the harbor, as the ship was dangerous to other ships and the coastal populations. Jane apologizes for welcoming Olunde home with news like this, but Olunde says he finds the captain's sacrifice inspiring. This shocks Jane, who says that nobody should die deliberately. Olunde asks if the captain's sacrifice was worth it to save the hundreds of people living around the harbor, and Jane doesn't have an answer.

Olunde's insistence that the captain's choice to sacrifice himself is an inspiration shows that Olunde still adheres to the Yoruba belief that it's acceptable and admirable to sacrifice one person for the greater good, which is exactly what Elesin intends to do. Especially when he's able to recognize that there are Englishmen who also behave in the same honorable way, it suggests that Elesin is able to make connections across the two cultures and understand both better as a result.

Olunde asks again for Pilkings. For the first time, Jane understands the significance of Olunde being here. She says that there's a problem in town that Pilkings is dealing with, and asks if Pilkings knows that Olunde is here. Olunde refuses to answer and says that he needs Jane's help to speak to Pilkings. He says that he's already been to their home and has spoken with Joseph. Jane says that if he's spoken to Joseph, Olunde must know what Pilkings is trying to do for Olunde and for his people.

Note that it never crosses Jane's mind that Olunde might know exactly what's going on with his father. This shows how little Jane thinks of the Yoruba and how invested they are in their traditions. In other words, it doesn't occur to her that Olunde might be fully on board with what's happening, as his time in England would, in her mind, have made Elesin's suicide unthinkable.

Olunde is perplexed, but says that a month ago, he received a cable from a relative saying only that the king was dead. Olunde explains that he knew he needed to come home to bury Elesin. Jane says that Pilkings is going to stop Elesin from dying, and Olunde says that this is why he needs to see Pilkings: he needs to explain that Pilkings *shouldn't* stop Elesin. Shocked, Jane sits down, and Olunde states that he's only home to bury his father.

Here, Olunde tries to show Jane that spending four years in England hasn't turned him into an Englishman of Nigerian origin—he's still Yoruba and still believes fully in the traditions that keep the culture alive. Instead, he'd like to use his power as someone with a foot in each culture to help Pilkings understand and behave accordingly.

Olunde says he traveled in the same convoy as the prince, so it was a safe and well-protected journey here. Jane suggests that Elesin is entitled to the same kind of protection, but Olunde insists that Jane doesn't understand. He explains that by dying, Elesin will be protected by his own "peace of mind" and honored by his people. He asks Jane if she'd think less of the prince if he hadn't agreed to accept the risk of losing his life while touring the colonies. When Jane looks offended, Olunde says that the English think that everything that seems to make sense came from them and their culture.

With this, Olunde explains exactly how the Yoruba think of death as Elesin will meet it: it's something that allows him to maintain his honor and also perform a great service for the rest of the community. It's a positive thing, not something to be feared or suppressed. Again, by suggesting that the prince is doing much the same thing by touring the colonies while there's a war raging, Olunde encourages Jane to look outside her culture for parallels elsewhere.

Even more offended, Jane says that the ritual of the king's horseman committing suicide is still barbaric and "feudalistic." Motioning in the direction of the dancers at the ball, Olunde asks what such decadence in the middle of a devastating war should be called. Jane insists that it's British-style therapy. Olunde says he doesn't really care what it is, but he knows now that white people are fantastic at surviving. He believes that the war should end with all white people killing each other and destroying their cultures. This would, he suggests, catapult the white, Western world into a primitive way of life akin to the way that Western people *think* African people live. Olunde says that he has the humility to let people survive as they see fit.

When Olunde implies that the decadent ball is silly in the middle of a deadly war, he suggests that in order to appropriately honor the people who are dying in the war, it's important to behave in a way that shows people are aware of what's going on. He also suggests that the English think the African people they're colonizing are very primitive, something that comes from the colonizers' inability or unwillingness to see that the natives are human beings too—their sides could easily be switched, especially as a result of a catastrophic event like a world war.

Jane questions again whether ritual suicide is acceptable, and Olunde suggests that it's nowhere near as horrific as mass suicide—like what's going on with the war. He says that the English don't call it that, but young men are dying by the thousands. He says that despite all these men dying in battle, the news talks about those battles as victories. Jane suggests that this is necessary to keep morale up, but Olunde asks if calling those deaths victories isn't disrespectful to the dead. He insists that the English have no right to judge other people.

By insisting that the English are actually disrespectful in many ways—by wearing the egungun costumes, and by not honoring their own dead soldiers properly—Olunde makes it clear that the Yoruba are actually less "primitive" than the English in many ways, and they also don't try to impose their culture and values on others. The Yoruba aren't, for example, trying to stop the English from having this ball.

Hesitantly, Jane asks if Olunde experienced discrimination in England based on his skin color, but Olunde says that it's not that simple—he didn't forget his history or his culture when he left, and being in England made him even more appreciative of his culture. Jane asks Olunde to promise to continue to pursue his goal of being a doctor. With genuine surprise, Olunde says that he fully intends to go back to England and finish his training after he buries Elesin.

Jane's question shows that she can only conceive of one possible experience for Olunde, and it's one in which overt racism and discrimination is the main problem. Because she's made few efforts to learn about the Yoruba, she doesn't understand how Olunde is struggling to bridge the gap between the two cultures and deal with the rampant racism he surely experienced too.

Jane scoffs, but Olunde leads her outside to listen to the drums. The rhythm builds, stops suddenly, and then begins again slowly. Olunde says it's over; Elesin is dead now. Jane screams that Olunde is callous, unfeeling, and just like the other "savages." The aide-de-camp rushes out when he hears Jane crying and tries to comfort her. Olunde tries to leave, but the aide-de-camp rudely tells Olunde to stay and answer his questions. When the aide-de-camp calls for an orderly, Jane tells him to stop and says that Olunde is a friend. Derisively, the aide-de-camp mutters that the natives think too highly of themselves when they wear European suits. Jane asks Olunde to stay, even though Olunde says he wants to go see Elesin before his body goes cold. She sends the aide-de-camp away.

The aide-de-camp shows that he's extremely racist in the way that he speaks so rudely to Olunde. Further, when he says that the natives wearing suits—an underhanded way to say that they're becoming more Western—makes them too full of themselves, it shows his belief that colonized people can never actually enter the society of the colonizers; they stay separate and inferior. He wants only to profit off of them, not have them become doctors like Olunde.

Jane implores Olunde to try and understand that everyone is just trying to help. She says she can't go back to the ball right now, and needs him to talk to her for a few minutes so she can regain her composure. She asks him to explain his calm reaction to hearing that Elesin is dead. Olunde says that it might be his medical training, but Jane says it has to be something that she and the other English people in the colony don't understand about the Yoruba.

Jane at least recognizes that she doesn't understand, and she knows that not understanding is what's causing these problems and making it so she can't effectively communicate with Olunde. This again shows that she has the potential to do and be better if she chooses to, though framing what Pilkings is doing as "helping" suggests that she's not interested in putting in real work.

Olunde agrees that she's right, but says too that Elesin has been dead in his mind for a month now. He's been thinking only of what he must do, as the person tasked with performing the rites over Elesin's body. He explains that he can't make a mistake, as a mistake could put his people in danger. Jane reminds Olunde that Elesin disowned him, but Olunde says that Elesin was just stubborn and can't actually disown his oldest son like that. Olunde says that he needs to go, and he takes Jane's hand as he tells her goodbye.

Olunde expands the audience's understanding of the Yoruba death rites here by pointing out that if he makes a mistake, it could spell disaster for the entire culture. He also shows that while a person within the culture can try to kick someone else out, the sense of collective responsibility means that it's actually impossible to do so in practice.

From offstage, Pilkings tells someone to "keep them here." He steps into Jane and Olunde's line of sight, jumps when he notices Olunde, and sends Jane to fetch the aide-de-camp. She runs away, and Olunde tells Pilkings that while he appreciates what he tried to do, it would've been a horrendous tragedy if he had succeeded. Pilkings is shocked. As Olunde says he needs to go see Elesin's body, Pilkings tells him that the police down the hill aren't letting anyone past. He offers an escort to Olunde as the aide-de-camp arrives.

At this point, Olunde believes that he's performing a necessary task that only he can, and that requires sharing with Pilkings why he shouldn't try to stop Elesin. In doing this, he attempts to help his people keep their culture alive for another generation and stave off the negative effects of colonialism.

Quietly and privately, Pilkings asks the aide-de-camp if the cellar where they used to store slaves is still useable and if it still has bars. It is, and Pilkings asks for the keys and a strong guard at the bottom of the hill, so that the sound of a riot won't carry to the house and alarm the prince. Pilkings says he told the rioters that he was going to lock Elesin up at his house and then came to the Residency via a back way, so he thinks the riot won't arrive here for a while. He says he'll take Elesin to the cellar himself and two policemen will stay with him all night.

The fact that Pilkings wants to imprison Elesin in a cellar that once held slaves bound for North America makes it clear that even if (as we'll later learn) Pilkings wasn't the only reason Elesin failed to die, Nigeria's history of slavery is still affecting the native population and keeping them under the control of the English colonizers.

Pilkings turns to Jane and asks her to stay with Olunde. When Olunde asks to see Elesin, Pilkings briskly says that there's a crisis going on related to Elesin, and given the state of security, Olunde needs to stay at the Residency. He marches off. Olunde and Jane wonder what's going on, and when Jane asks what could've sparked the riot, Olunde says that the only reason he can think of for a riot would be if Pilkings succeeded in stopping Elesin.

Jane not knowing what's going on again shows the reader how little Pilkings thinks of her and how little power she has. Pilkings still thinks that he's helping by saving Elesin, when really he's causing a riot.

From a distance, Olunde and Jane hear Elesin bellowing angrily for the white men to get their hands off of him. Jane tries to move Olunde inside as Pilkings gives the order to carry Elesin. Elesin continues to shout at the white men until they gag him. With another low bellow, Elesin breaks away from his captors and runs until he sees Olunde. At this point, he stops dead. The constables catch up and try to hold him, but Jane screams at them to let him go. Pilkings gives the order and the constables let Elesin go. Elesin collapses at Olunde's feet. Olunde looks at Elesin and says that he doesn't have a father anymore. He calls Elesin an "eater of leftovers" and walks away.

Olunde's reaction to seeing his father shows that Elesin's inability to die is something that dishonors him immensely to everyone, even family—and even a family member that is supposedly "Westernized." Saying that Elesin eats leftovers now is a way for Olunde to show Elesin how unimportant and dishonorable he is (it's also a callback to the women insulting Amusa by saying that he eats the English's leftovers). The fact that Jane is successful in getting the constables to let go of Elesin shows that she has some degree of power, but she is still extremely limited in situations like this.

ACT 5

Elesin stands in his cell, his wrists **chained**. His bride sits outside the cell, looking at the ground, and there are two guards watching him. Pilkings enters, leans against the bars, and joins Elesin in looking at the moon. He attempts to engage Elesin in conversation. Elesin insists that the night isn't beautiful or peaceful; the world's peace has been destroyed forever. Pilkings reminds Elesin that he saved his life, but Elesin says that Pilkings did the exact opposite, and in doing so, also destroyed many other people's lives. Pilkings insists he did his duty and doesn't regret it, but Elesin says that he won't regret it until later.

Here, the two differing conceptions of duty come up against each other. Elesin tries to explain that he had a duty to his people to die, while Pilkings insists that he's doing his duty by keeping Elesin from dying. Notice, however, that the way that Elesin speaks shows that his inability to do his duty has more far-reaching consequences than Pilkings's; while Pilkings may have been embarrassed, the Yoruba people are now irrevocably knocked off course.

After a moment of silence, Elesin says that he knows Pilkings is waiting for dawn, as he believes that Elesin will be safe once the sun rises. He says that Pilkings has no reason to worry, as he was supposed to die at a specific moment during the night, and that moment passed a long time ago. Elesin explains that the spirits sent word of that specific time through the drums, and Elesin began to follow the moon to the afterlife. It was at that moment that Pilkings arrived. Pilkings insists that they just see their duties differently.

Though Pilkings suggests that he and Elesin just don't see eye to eye in regards to what should've happened, there's more to this—Pilkings stopped Elesin from dying, thereby showing that as far as he's concerned, his duty and his beliefs are more powerful, meaningful, and should take precedence over any of Elesin's or the Yoruba's.

Elesin tells Pilkings that he doesn't blame him, even though he stole Olunde and sent him to England and then stopped Elesin from fulfilling his destiny. He asks if Pilkings planned it all out, but Pilkings says that if he did plan on stealing Olunde, he failed. Elesin replies that regardless, Pilkings succeeded in making it so Elesin didn't see this coming. Now, the world is off kilter and people are lost. Pilkings points out that Olunde doesn't think that everything is lost, which shocks Elesin. He reminds Pilkings of how Olunde behaved when "the world reversed itself" and he fell down in front of his son. Pilkings explains that Olunde regrets what he said, but Elesin says that Olunde spoke correctly. Elesin understands now that Olunde was right to go to England to learn the English people's secrets so he can seek revenge for Elesin's shame.

When Elesin begins to talk about the way things begin to go wrong when he had to kneel down in front of his son, it shows the reader that there are some tangible negative consequences to Elesin's failed suicide; it's not all going to take place in an unreachable otherworldly realm. It's also important to note that Elesin recognizes the power that Olunde now has, given that he's been in England and understands the English culture better. Now, he'll be able to fight the English and colonialism as a whole because of what he knows about his oppressors. Instead of turning against his own culture and being convinced of English superiority, he weaponizes his new knowledge against those who would oppress him.

Pilkings offers that he spoke to Olunde about the matter, and Olunde asked for Elesin's forgiveness. He wants to come and receive Elesin's blessing and say goodbye. Elesin asks if Olunde is leaving, and Pilkings says he thought it best, and advised Olunde to leave before dawn. Sadly, Elesin agrees, but says that he can no longer be honored as Olunde's father, so what he thinks doesn't matter. Pilkings explains that Olunde will stop by later, per his advice. Elesin points out that Pilkings has advice for all of their lives, but Elesin can't figure out what god's authority he's calling on to get his advice.

Now that Pilkings has succeeded in stopping Elesin, he feels even more able to take control over everything else and dictate how things proceed from here. Note too how Elesin speaks of himself now. He's no longer a revered figure; he's one who is so dishonored, he can't even claim that he has a son who might appreciate his opinion on something.

Pilkings turns to go, but asks if he can ask Elesin a question. He explains that he's learned a few Yoruba sayings, and remembered one when he came upon the women all encouraging Elesin to kill himself in the market. The proverb says that elders approach heaven grimly, and don't necessarily make the journey to the afterlife willingly. Elesin sighs, but Jane runs in, calling for Pilkings, before he can answer. Pilkings and Jane run off.

Again, Pilkings shows that he may know more about the native people than he lets on, but he still uses what he knows to support his own beliefs rather than seeking to understand the Yoruba on their own terms. This means that Pilkings will never be able to understand why Elesin had to die, even if hesitating was potentially natural.

Elesin turns to his bride and says that first he blamed Pilkings for his failure, then the gods, but now, he wants to blame her. He's not sure that blaming anyone matters now that the world is so upset, but his bride was more than just a woman he desired. Elesin says that she was the last gift from the land of the living, and her body made it far more difficult to cross over to the afterlife. He confesses that his weakness and failure didn't just come from Pilkings: he didn't want to die.

By blaming his failure to kill himself on Pilkings, the gods, his bride, and on his desire to stay alive, Elesin shows that this is a far more complex situation than anyone has thus far given it credit for. By admitting that maybe he didn't really want to die, Elesin also leaves open the possibility that even as he despises the Western beliefs that drive Pilkings, he might also relate to some of them.

Pilkings and Jane return to the cellar. Pilkings is annoyed that Jane keeps interfering as he looks over a note, which seems to be from Olunde. Jane implores her husband to let Olunde visit, but Pilkings insists that he's not inclined to give in to the threat in the note that there will be rioting tomorrow if Olunde doesn't get his way. Cursing, Pilkings laments that the prince is visiting now. He approaches Elesin and says that Iyaloja came with a note from Olunde and wants to see him, but he's not thrilled about letting her in. Elesin says that he'll see her, since there's no more shame for him to experience.

When Pilkings curses about the prince being here, it shows that this really wouldn't bother him so much if a very important person weren't watching. Again, this suggests that Pilkings's conception of duty is extremely flawed, as he only sees the value in doing what he's supposed to do when he wants to impress someone. Elesin, on the other hand, wants (in theory at least) to behave dutifully no matter who's watching.

Pilkings leaves to fetch Iyaloja while Jane encourages Elesin to understand that Pilkings is trying to help. Elesin gives her a strange look, points to his bride, and notes how still and quiet she is. He says that he'll speak with Pilkings, not Jane.

Here, Elesin tells Jane that as a woman, she has no right to question these things. Her job is to interpret things for the reader or viewer, not make him understand what's going on.

Pilkings returns and asks Elesin to swear on his honor that he won't accept anything from Iyaloja. Elesin points out that Pilkings has certainly already searched Iyaloja and touched her in a way that he'd never touch his own mother. He also points to the guards and says that Pilkings already has his honor, as well as the honor of his people. Exasperated, Pilkings shows Iyaloja a line on the floor, tells her not to cross it, and instructs the guards to whistle if she does. He leads Jane away.

The fact that Pilkings is still so afraid that Elesin will die shows that even though Elesin explained to him that he missed his opportunity, Pilkings refuses to take Elesin seriously and learn something about the Yoruba. This comes back to the idea that the English in this play think the natives are all liars and treat them accordingly.

Iyaloja is derisive of Elesin and insults his cowardice. Elesin wearily asks for Iyaloja's message, even if it's just curses, and says he deserves her anger. Iyaloja shouts that she warned Elesin to not leave a cursed "seed" behind, and asks who he think he is to create new life when he couldn't even move on to the afterlife. The bride gives a heaving sob, and Iyaloja looks at Elesin with even more anger. Iyaloja asks how Elesin will deal with this catastrophe.

It's important to note that fixing this situation falls to Elesin, not to someone else—or at least, that's what Iyaloja would like Elesin to believe at this point. The reader will later learn that Olunde already attempted to fix the situation by dying, which suggests that Iyaloja is just trying to make Elesin understand the consequences of his selfish behavior.

Elesin insists that all of his powers left when he tried to die, especially when he felt the **chains** on his wrists. Iyaloja says that he betrayed them and now will have to eat the "world's leftovers" and live in his dishonor. Elesin says he doesn't need whatever "burden" Iyaloja brought with her; he needs understanding. Iyaloja points out that she warned him, but Elesin says that an "alien hand" poisoned his will to die and stopped him from following through. Unimpressed, Iyaloja says that she doesn't care how Elesin explains things to himself. In any case, it's unfitting to hear "please save me!" coming from an ancestral mask.

In this exchange, Iyaloja reassumes her role as Elesin's conscience and shows him where he went wrong and where he'll go wrong in the future. Her comment about the ancestral mask has to do with the way that the Yoruba interact with the egungun. The ancestors speak through the costumes, so expressing fear through the mask is inappropriate.

Iyaloja reminds Elesin that she's here with a burden, which is at the gate where the white men are stationed. Before she brings it in, she asks Elesin if the "parent shoot" of the plantain withers to give life to the new shoot, or if things happen in the opposite direction. Elesin is confused, but answers that the parent withers. Iyaloja shouts that the world sees things differently. She inadvertently steps over the line, and the guards blow their whistles and jump up to restrain Elesin. Pilkings races in, learns what happened, and Elesin asks them to leave Iyaloja alone. This makes Iyaloja even angrier, as she says that once, Elesin was powerful enough that only brave men dared to touch him.

By using the metaphor of the plantain, which characters use often throughout the play, Iyaloja forces Elesin to engage with the language specific to his culture in order to interpret what's going on and what he must do. Iyaloja's anger after the guards jump up shows that what she's really angry about is the fact that Elesin seems resigned to let the colonizers win, and isn't fighting at all to fix what happened.

Pilkings says that it's time for Iyaloja to leave and explains that they're moving Elesin tomorrow. Iyaloja insists that she knows all of this, and this is why she brought her burden with her tonight. She cryptically reminds Elesin of his "lesser oaths" that he can't break, and Elesin asks Pilkings to let in the women that Iyaloja says are coming. Addressing Pilkings, Iyaloja asks, if the prince were to die here, if they'd bury him here—if his people don't have ceremonies to honor the dead. Pilkings points out that they don't make people commit suicide to keep their kings company.

By pointing out that even the English have specific customs surrounding the dead, Iyaloja tries to make Pilkings see that they must be allowed to perform the rites for the king in the appropriate manner. The fact that there are women coming with something important is a reminder that it falls to the women to make sure that the men around them follow the rules; they're the ones that bear the burden when the men mess up.

Iyaloja says that she's not here to explain things to Pilkings. She tells him that Elesin understands what happens when a king dies. He knows that it'll cause trouble when the king realizes that he's been betrayed; the king will wander among enemies. Iyaloja asks Pilkings to let Elesin release their king. The aide-de-camp races in with news that there's a group of women chanting on the hill. Jane suggests that this is what Olunde referred to in the letter, but Pilkings snarls that he can't let them in. He asks the aide-de-camp to send a car to fetch Olunde, as it's time for him to go. Iyaloja says that Olunde will come himself soon and asks Pilkings to let the women in.

In this situation, Iyaloja is the only person who appears to have any real power—and her power comes from what she says, not from what she does. She implies that the women will come up the hill regardless, and is able to make it clear to Pilkings and Elesin what's going to happen. This elevates the position of characters like Iyaloja, as she's the one who allows the audience and the other characters to understand what's going on.

The aide-de-camp points out that the group is just women, so Pilkings agrees that they can enter. As the aide-de-camp runs off, Pilkings warns Iyaloja that his men will shoot if the women cause trouble. Iyaloja scorns the logic of the white man, who will kill other people to prevent one person dying. She insists that the prince will sleep soundly tonight and soon, her king will also be at peace. She asks that Pilkings let Elesin complete this final duty.

The aide-de-camp mentioning that the group is just women shows that he doesn't appreciate the power of the women in Yoruba society. As far as he's concerned, they're helpless and controllable. In reality, they're here to make sure that Elesin understands exactly how badly he messed up.

The women enter, chanting and carrying a long cylindrical object on their shoulders. It's covered in cloth. They set it down, form a circle around it, and continue to chant with the drummer and the praise-singer. Pilkings asks what the object is, and Iyaloja says that it's the burden Pilkings made. Elesin wants to whisper words for the king in the ear of the king's courier (the object), but Pilkings won't let him out. Iyaloja tries to convince Pilkings, but he continues to refuse.

The play raises the tension regarding what is being carried in as Elesin's "burden." By denying Elesin the privilege of getting out so he can speak to the king's courier, Pilkings makes it so Elesin doesn't even have a power that the play affords to women. This makes Elesin's position even lower, especially as it also denies him the ability to do anything to fix the mess he's made.

The praise-singer reminds Elesin of how he said that if he cannot come, to ask his horse for help, or ask his dog to track a path. He says that at that point, Elesin told the praise-singer that he already found the path to the afterlife. The praise-singer continues, reminding Elesin of his other warnings and words of advice. Then, he motions to the object and says that it's the favorite companion of the gods. Now, Elesin's horse and his dog have gone before him, and he's left eating the world's leftovers. They tell him that he has to perform the rites over the person who took his place. Iyaloja then removes the outer covering, revealing Olunde's body.

Remember that Olunde came home to perform the rites over Elesin's body. Now that Elesin is being asked to perform the rites for Olunde, it's another upset in the way the world should be—the son is supposed to perform the rites for the father, not the other way around. The praise-singer is still willing to guides Elesin and show him where he's gone wrong so that hopefully, Elesin can make better choices in the future.


The praise-singer tells Elesin that they gave him the power to keep the world in line, but he allowed "evil strangers" to shift the world's course and in doing so, jeopardize their future. Olunde, however, has now given his life to Elesin. This is wrong, and the world is even more off-course than they first thought. Elesin stares at Olunde for a moment before flinging the **chain** of his shackles around his neck and strangling himself. He dies before the guards can do anything to save him, so they lower him to the ground. Pilkings races into the cell and performs CPR on Elesin while the women continue to chant.

Killing himself with the chain, especially since he's in a former holding cell for slaves, shows that even if Elesin's fault was loving life too much and had nothing to do with colonialism, colonialism is still what kills him in the end. In this regard, the English come out on top here. Their history in the area has finally managed to upset the local customs and destroy an integral part of the culture. Pilkings tries to save Elesin's life one last time, once again disregarding Elesin's own wishes in the matter.

Iyaloja asks Pilkings why he's trying so hard to do something that nobody, not even Elesin, will thank him for doing. She says that Elesin is gone now, but he's late and will arrive in the afterlife stained in horse manure from the king's stallion. Tiredly, Pilkings asked if this is what Iyaloja wanted. Iyaloja says that this is what Pilkings gets when he messes with the lives of strangers, wears clothes reserved for the dead, and then expects to not have blood on his hands. She tells him that because of him, they've lost Olunde too.

Now that Elesin is dead, Iyaloja turns her wrath on Pilkings, attempting to shame him for what he's done. Her mention that Pilkings wore clothes for the dead is a reference to the egungun costumes he wore to the ball. This suggests that he was asking for trouble when he put on clothes that are only worn by the dead, as in doing so, he sought to control both life and death.




When Pilkings moves to close Elesin's eyes, Iyaloja shouts at him to stop and nods to the bride. The bride steps into the cell, closes Elesin's eyes, and pours dirt over each of his closed eyelids. Iyaloja leads the bride away, telling her to forget both the dead and the living and to concentrate only on the unborn.

Encouraging the bride to look to the future of her unborn child shows that regardless of what happened, Iyaloja and the remaining women need to look to their children to save them. They are the ones who have to deal with the consequences of Elesin's failure and English colonialism in the long run.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Brock, Zoë. "*Death and the King's Horseman*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 3 May 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Brock, Zoë. "*Death and the King's Horseman*." LitCharts LLC, May 3, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/death-and-the-king-s-horseman.

To cite any of the quotes from *Death and the King's Horseman* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Soyinka, Wole. Death and the King's Horseman. Norton. 1975.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Soyinka, Wole. Death and the King's Horseman. New York: Norton. 1975.