

## Wole Soyinka, *Death and the King's Horseman*

Akinwande Oluwole Babatunde 'Wole' Soyinka was born in Nigeria in 1934. He studied first in Nigeria, then in Great Britain. He started his career writing plays and working with the Royal Court Theatre, London, trying to merge European theatrical traditions with those of his Yoruba people. He also wrote poems, a number of essays, memoirs, novels and short stories.

A Professor of Comparative Literature in Nigeria, Soyinka taught at various American Universities (Cornell, Emory, Nevada, Los Angeles, Harvard, Yale) and at Oxford. His subjects were African Studies, Theatre Arts, Creative Writing. In 1986 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, the first African to be honoured in that category. His Nobel Lecture was devoted to South African freedom fighter Nelson Mandela.

In December 2017, he was awarded with the Europe Theatre Prize because he had 'contributed to the realisation of cultural events that promote understanding and the exchange of knowledge between peoples'.

Soyinka implacably and openly criticized the successive Nigerian dictatorships, as well as other totalitarian governments.

In 1967, during the Nigerian Civil War, he was arrested and put in solitary confinement for two years. During the regime of General Sani Abacha (1993-1998), Soyinka managed to escape but a death sentence was pronounced on him 'in absentia'.

*Death and the King's Horseman* was written when Soyinka was a fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge. In the preface the author declares the play demonstrates the need for interaction between African and European cultures and must not be considered a clash of cultures.

In this excerpt, Jane Pilkings, the British colonial ruler's wife, meets Olunde, the king's horseman's son, outside the great hall of the Residency. Here the Resident has organized a masque in honour of the Prince who is on an official visit to the British colonies.



### *A Barbaric Custom*

OLUNDE: A relation sent it [a cable] weeks ago, and it said nothing about my father. All it said was, Our King is dead. But I knew I had to return home at once so as to bury my father. I understood that.

JANE: Well, thank God you don't have to go through that agony. Simon [Mr Pilkings] is going to stop it.

OLUNDE: That's why I want to see him. He's is wasting his time. And since he has been so helpful to me I don't want him to incur the enmity of our people. Especially over nothing.

JANE: (sits down open-mouthed) You... you Olunde?

OLUNDE: Mrs Pilkings, I came home to bury my father. As soon as I heard the news I booked my passage home. In fact we were fortunate. We travelled in the same convoy<sup>1</sup> as your Prince, so we had excellent protection.

JANE: But you don't think your father is also entitled to whatever protection is available<sup>2</sup> to him?

OLUNDE: How can I make you understand? He *has* protection. No one can undertake<sup>3</sup> what he does tonight without the deepest protection the mind can conceive.<sup>4</sup> What can you offer him in place of his peace of mind, in place of the honour and veneration of his own people? What would you think of your Prince if he had refused to accept the risk of losing his life on this voyage? This... showing-the-flag<sup>5</sup> of colonial possessions.

JANE: I see. So it isn't just medicine you studied in England.

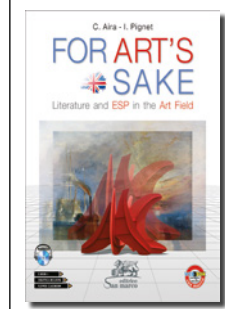
OLUNDE: Yet another error into which your people fall. You believe that everything which appears to make sense was learnt from you.

JANE: Not so fast, Olunde. You have learnt to argue<sup>6</sup> I can tell that, but I never said you made

### GLOSSARY

1 group of ships and vehicles – 2 obtainable – 3 start – 4 think of – 5 official – 6 discuss





sense. However cleverly you try to put it, it is still a barbaric custom. It is even worse – it's feudal! The king dies and the chieftain<sup>7</sup> must be buried with him. How feudalistic can you get!

OLUNDE: (waves his hand towards the background. The Prince is dancing past again – to a different step – and all the guests are bowing and curtsying<sup>8</sup> as he passes). And this? Even in the midst of a devastating war, look at that. What name would you give to that?

JANE: Therapy, British style. The preservation of sanity in the midst of chaos.

OLUNDE: Others would call it decadence. However it doesn't really interest me. You white races know how to survive. I've seen proof of that. By all logical and natural laws this war should end with all the white races wiping out<sup>9</sup> one another, wiping out the so-called civilization for all time and reverting<sup>10</sup> to a state of primitivism the like of which has so far only existed in your imagination when you thought of us. I thought all that at the beginning. Then I slowly realized that your greatest art is the art of survival. But at least have the humility to let others survive in their own way.

JANE: Through ritual suicide?

OLUNDE: Is that worse than mass suicide? Mrs Pilkings, what do you call what those young men are sent to do by their generals in this war? Of course you have also mastered<sup>11</sup> the art of calling things by names which don't remotely describe them.

#### GLOSSARY

7 chief of a tribe – 8 kneeling in respect – 9 destroying – 10 going back – 11 learnt

#### ACTIVITIES

1 Answer the following questions.

- 1 Why has Olunde returned home?
- 2 Why did he have protection during his voyage home?
- 3 What kind of protection will Olunde's father have?
- 4 How does Jane define the king's horseman's ritual suicide?
- 5 How does she define the dancing, bowing and courtseying?
- 6 Why won't the white races wipe out one another as a result of the war?
- 7 What is the war according to Olunde?
- 8 What do the whites do to hide the truth?

2 Olunde has been in England four years to study medicine. Jane Pilkings is an upper-class lady. Pay attention to the language they speak and use the following questions to write a short paragraph.

- 1 Who uses words like feudalism, barbaric, therapy?
- 2 Who uses words like primitivism, survival?
- 3 Does Olunde speak short sentences and use simple basic words?
- 4 Can you supply examples of Olunde's mastery of English?
- 5 Do you think the author has done this on purpose? To show what?
- 6 Does it mean that Olunde will reject the traditions of the Yoruban people?