

No Will for Living in *Death and the King's Horseman*

Jacob Roeland

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ENG 203H, Section H001

Professor Charles Sumner

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Jacob Roeland

Professor Charles Sumner

English 203H, Section H03H

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Wole Soyinka advises the reader in the author's note of *Death and the King's Horseman* to not read nor produce his play as a “clash of cultures” story as it is not one. The play rather depicts the similarity between two cultures, the Arumba and the English. Because both cultures have a lack of communication and self-expression and are driven by the power of social expectations, the play suggests that free will does not exist in either one.

When the play opens, we see Elesin Oba and his Praise-Singer heading into a market talking about the former's soon-to-be death. The king of the Arumba has died and by law and custom, Elesin must also die to accompany the king into the afterlife as Elesin was the king's horseman. The women of the market approach him and begin to sing his praises with the Praise-Singer. As they are singing and Elesin is dancing, he spots a beautiful girl. This girl is so beautiful that he tells Iyaloja, the “mother” of the market, that he wishes to marry the girl. Even though the girl is already betrothed to Iyaloja's son, she accepts his request since his time is short. Iyaloja warns him to be careful, travel light, and to “be sure the seed you leave in [this earth] attracts no curse.”

Act II begins with Simon Pilkings, a District Officer, and his wife, Jane, practicing their tango for a ball that evening. One of his officers—Amusa, a native—goes to the house to report that “Elesin Oba is to commit death tonight.” However he is rendered near speechless by the

death clothes that Pilkings and Jane are wearing. Even with coaxing and threats, he will not speak to them while they are wearing the clothes; eventually he writes his report on a pad after they had left the room. After reading it, Pilkings calls for his servant Joseph, also a native, to deliver a note to the police station about the matter, thinking Amusa meant that Elesin was going to murder people. Joseph corrects him saying that the chief would commit suicide instead. After sending Joseph to the station, Pilkings and Jane head to the ball.

Amusa and two officers begin Act III by going through the market to arrest Elesin. The women push them back, mocking them and telling them that they, as men, have no right to be in the market. The officers leave but not before promising to return. Elesin, after having sex with his new bride, begins to fall into a trance and starts dancing a slow, heavy dance; his last it seems.

Act IV opens at the ball with the Prince and all the British residents present. Pilkings is called away after receiving a message regarding the ritual happening in the Arumba camp. After finally dismissing Amusa for again not giving a report, Pilkings takes some men and heads quickly for the village. Jane is left behind and meets Olunde who has come to bury his father. They both talk about the other's culture and the night's events. Pilkings walks up again and is surprised to see Olunde. He gives quick instructions to the aide-de-camp to prepare a cell in the basement of the residency for Elesin, who is heard trying to break free from his captors but is unable to. At the sound of his father's voice, Olunde freezes. Elesin, upon seeing his son, runs to him and falls on his knees. Olunde calls him "eater of left-overs" and leaves, walking back down to the village.

The final act takes place in the makeshift cell in the basement of the residency. Elesin and

Pilkings discuss the evening, and Elesin tries to make Pilkings understand what damage he has done to his society. They are interrupted by the news that women from the village have brought something. They place it in front of Elesin, who believes it to be the king. He asks Pilkings for permission to whisper the words of his oath into the ear of his king, but Pilkings refuses. Iyaloja pulls back the sheet covering the body to reveal Olunde. She tells Elesin how Olunde died to retain the honour lost by Elesin. Stricken with grief, Elesin kills himself with the chains around his wrists and arms. The play ends with Iyaloja and the bride leaving the cell.

The lack of communication can be seen from the very first pages of the play as Elesin is walking through the closing market. When the women of the market proclaim “We know you for a man of honour,” he shouts for them to stop, that he is “bitterly offended.” The women had every right to tell the man (tell the man what??) who had just said “Life is honour. It ends when honour ends.” It was a compliment saying that they knew that Elesin would remain an honourable man to the death. When asked what they said to offend him, Elesin only answers in riddles until the Praise-Singer asks him to be clearer. Elesin laughs it off, hiding the real reason behind his annoyance with the lie that he was ashamed because of his clothes.

In Act II, Amusa has a report to give to Pilkings about Elesin and his committing suicide that night. When he reaches their house, he discovers that they are wearing the garb of the *egungun*. Amusa refuses to give the report because “how can man talk against death to person in uniform of death?” Pilkings tries to reason with him, saying that Amusa usually is not one for believing in “mumbo-jumbo”. He even threatens him with discipline, but Amusa does not budge. Pilkings eventually leaves the room letting Amusa write his report on paper. There is an obvious lack of communication here: even though Amusa tries to explain to both Pilkings and Jane, they

seem to not listen with Pilkings, simply demanding that Amusa tell him.

There is also a lack of communication between Olunde and Elesin. When Olunde leaves Nigeria to study medicine in Britain, Elesin publicly disowns him. They do not speak to each other again until the night when Elesin is supposed to die. When Elesin sees Olunde, he falls at Olunde's knees begging him to forgive him and to speak or at least acknowledge him for Olunde had ignored him up to this point. Olunde looked down and said, "I have no father, eater of left-overs," essentially disowning him. They do not directly speak to each other again for the rest of the play. Through Pilkings, Olunde tells his father that he is not angry at him and wants forgiveness for saying what he did. The most that is shared between father and son happens when the women bring his dead son's body to Elesin. The dead body speaks to Elesin, showing him the consequences of his hesitance. After seeing his son's body, Elesin strangles himself with his chains.

There are also several social expectations cast upon many characters forcing them to act against their will, the main one being Elesin. In several places it can be seen where Elesin does not wish to die but is still forced to adhere to custom. First, he grew annoyed when the women of the market tell him that he is a "man of honour". As said before, he says that he is simply upset that they would call him a man of honour when he is wearing such terrible clothes. Instead he actually was simply tired of hearing them remind him again and again about his upcoming death. Second, Elesin is still attracted to a beautiful woman and wishes to have sex with her. A man that is preparing for the next life should not be thinking about this one's pleasures. Nonetheless, he marries this girl, has sex with her, and so leaves his seed behind. Third, and most damning of them, Elesin himself admits to his bride that he did not wish to die.

“First I blamed the white man, then I blamed the gods for deserting me. Now I feel I want to blame you for the mystery of the sapping of my will...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.”

Elesin does not wish to die. He does not wish to have to complete his role as the king's horseman. Yet both the law and his culture demand his obedience; his thoughts on the issue do not matter.

Amusa is also expected to give up his free will. In the aforementioned scene, Pilkings reminds Amusa that he is a servant of His Majesty's Government and threatens discipline if he does not give the report. Amusa does not say a word until finally writing it down on a notepad. Later at the ball, a similar scene occurs when Amusa returns from the village after receiving the taunting from the girls. Here again, he refuses to give his report due to Pilkings wearing the *egungun*. Instead, Pilkings asked Amusa to set aside his personal beliefs and fears. Since he was an officer, he was no longer allowed to make his decisions for himself; instead he must obey the commands that best serve Pilkings and His Majesty's Government.

In an example of both lack of communication and free will, women from both cultures are essentially not allowed, or at least discouraged, to speak. The best example of this is with the bride, who never speaks throughout the play. She is simply in the background subservient to the wants of those around her. She is married to Elesin without any input from her and closes Elesin's eyes only after Iyaloja rebukes Pilkings. Another example of the lack of free will for women is with Jane, who is constantly waved away by Pilkings throughout the play and then by

Olunde near the middle of it. She is openly rebuked by Elesin, who basically tells her that she should be like his bride and not say a single word, that this is male business. Women are simply not allowed to speak.

In another example of having no free will in this culture, Olunde is obligated to take his father's place. While the others would be faced with ridicule or admonishment for their lack of following society's expectations, Olunde faces no societal repercussions if he chooses not to kill himself. It is not expected of him to do so as he has already been disowned for leaving the society. Even though Olunde is not forced to, he still does not have free will in this matter; it is simply an illusion. He is duty bound as the oldest son of Elesin to follow through where his father did not. As Iyaloja proclaims, "There lies the honour of your household and of our race. Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life."

Soyinka's play is much more than just a clash of cultures trope. It is an example of how both cultures, the indigenous Arumba and the outsider English, do not have free will. This is apparent by the great expectations society places on the characters and then also by the lack of communication among the characters themselves. In this context, the reader understands Soyinka's instructions that this play depicts the similarities rather than the contrasts between the two societies.