

MR. SMITH: She's still young. She might very well remarry. She looks so well in mourning.

MRS. SMITH: But who would take care of the children? You know very well that they have a boy and a girl. What are their names?

MR. SMITH: Bobby and Bobby like their parents. Bobby Watson's uncle, old Bobby Watson, is a rich man and very fond of the boy. He might very well pay for Bobby's education.

MRS. SMITH: That would be proper. And Bobby Watson's aunt, old Bobby Watson, might very well, in her turn, pay for the education of Bobby Watson, Bobby Watson's daughter. That way Bobby, Bobby Watson's mother, could remarry. Has she anyone in mind?

MR. SMITH: Yes, a cousin of Bobby Watson's.

MRS. SMITH: Who? Bobby Watson?

MR. SMITH: Which Bobby Watson do you mean?

MRS. SMITH: Why, Bobby Watson, the son of old Bobby Watson, the late Bobby Watson's other uncle.

MR. SMITH: No, it's not that one, it's someone else. It's Bobby Watson, the son of old Bobby Watson, the late Bobby Watson's aunt.

MRS. SMITH: Are you referring to Bobby Watson the commercial traveler?

MR. SMITH: All the Bobby Watsons are commercial travelers.

MRS. SMITH: What a difficult trade! However, they do well at it.

MR. SMITH: Yes, when there's no competition.

MRS. SMITH: And when is there no competition?

MR. SMITH: On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Tuesdays.

MRS. SMITH: Ah! Three days a week? And what does Bobby Watson do on those days?

MR. SMITH: He rests, he sleeps.

MRS. SMITH: But why doesn't he work those three days if there's no competition?

MR. SMITH: I don't know everything. I can't answer all your idiotic questions!

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think Ionesco chooses the name of Bobby Watson for his "veritable living corpse"?
2. What importance does the proliferation of the various Bobby Watsons have?
3. How do the couple talk and relate to each other?
4. How would you characterize their conversation?
5. What kinds of things is Ionesco satirizing here? Is there a lesson here for the reader?
6. What is the overall tone of the passage?

Passage for Study

Wole Soyinka on Myth and Tragedy in Yoruba Culture

In 1986, the Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka (b. 1934) became the first African to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Soyinka comes from the Yoruba people, one of the three traditional tribal groups in Nigeria. In his contributions to Nigerian literature, he melds Yoruba culture into his own literary creations while nonetheless writing in English and adopting many Western literary forms.¹³ His critical writings on tragedy explore the connections and conflicts between Western and Yoruba frameworks.

¹³Like Brecht, Soyinka has adapted John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. In 1973, the National Theatre of Great Britain commissioned and performed Soyinka's adaptation of Euripides' tragedy about the cult of Dionysus, *The Bacchae*. In a prefatory note of acknowledgement, Soyinka mentions his own poem *Idanre*, "a Passion poem of Ogun, elder brother to Dionysus." Wole Soyinka, *Collected Plays*, Vol. I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 234.

In the Western tradition, in ancient Greece and then again in medieval Europe, drama seems to have developed from ritual. Many theorists have argued that Greek tragedy, for example, originated in ancient rituals of sacrifice, the tragic hero resembling the "scapegoat" who is killed by the community in an effort to right their own relation to the gods. But the connection between theatre buildings and sacred sites of sacrifice, or between characters on stage and a chorus of worshippers, has become so remote as to be merely symbolic—at least in Western drama. For African drama, Soyinka seeks to preserve and reinvigorate the connection between ancient cosmic ritual and modern theatre.

To explain how African theatre can reenact African myth, Soyinka has written several essays dealing with the mythic sources of Yoruba ritual. According to Soyinka's interpretation, Yoruba culture separates the cosmos into the human world and the world

of the deities. At the same time, the human world itself contains manifestations of the ancestors, the living, and the unborn. Soyinka believes this experience differs significantly from the Western idea that individuals orient themselves in their world through a sense of time as past, present, and future. In the Yoruba world, it is not the individual's sense of time that counts, but rather a community's collective sense that it has complex ties to the ancestral community and to the unborn community.

The different communities of ancestors, living, and unborn are also, however, separated from one another, and these human worlds as a whole are separated from the realm of the gods. The gulf between areas of existence Soyinka calls *transition* or the *transitional ether*. Since, according to tradition, the gods were once completely and unhappily separated from human beings, many Yoruba myths are stories about the efforts made to cross these gulfs. Ogun, the god of iron and of metallurgic lore and artistry, was the first to succeed in conquering the transition. He crossed the gulf to the human world by extracting iron from the earth and thus providing the human world with the source of its weapons and its tools. Ogun is also, Soyinka explains, "the god of creativity, guardian of the road . . . , explorer, hunter, god of war, Custodian of the sacred oath."

Soyinka argues that traditional Yoruba tragedy acts out the suffering caused by the gulfs in existence and by the painful acts of will or assertion performed to bridge them. He has sought to develop a contemporary African theatre that would not only be drama in the Western, secular sense of the term, but also ritual in the Yoruba sense of tragedy. In the following poetic-philosophical excerpt from an early essay, Soyinka weaves African myth into the idea of tragedy, with important implications for the task of the modern African playwright.

From "The Fourth Stage: *Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy.*"

For the Yoruba, the gods are the final measure of eternity, as humans are of earthly transience. To think, because of this, that the Yoruba mind reaches intuitively towards absorption in godlike essence is to misunderstand the principle of religious rites, and to misread, as many have done, the significance of religious possession. Past, present, and future being so pertinently conceived and woven into the Yoruba world view, the element of eternity which is the gods'



Wole Soyinka

prerogative does not have the same quality of remoteness or exclusiveness which it has in Christian or Buddhist culture. The belief of the Yoruba in the contemporaneous existence within his daily experience of these aspects of time has long been recognized but again misinterpreted. It is no abstraction. The Yoruba is not, like European man, concerned with the purely conceptual aspects of time; they are too concretely realized in his own life, religion, sensitivity, to be mere tags for explaining the metaphysical order of his world. If we may put the same thing in fleshed-out cognitions, life, present life, contains within it manifestations of the ancestral, the living, and the unborn. All are vitally within the intimations and affectiveness of life, beyond mere abstract conceptualization.

And yet the Yoruba does not for that reason fail to distinguish between himself and the deities, between himself and

the ancestors, between the unborn and his reality, or discard his awareness of the essential gulf that lies between one area of existence and another. This gulf is what must be constantly diminished by the sacrifices, the rituals, the ceremonies of appeasement to those cosmic powers which lie guardian to the gulf. Spiritually, the primordial disquiet of the Yoruba psyche may be expressed as the existence in collective memory of a primal severance in transitional ether,¹⁴ whose first effective defiance is symbolized in the myth of the gods' descent to earth and the battle with immense chaotic growth which has sealed off reunion with man. . . .

The first actor—for he led the others—was Ogun, first suffering deity, first creative energy, the first challenger, and conqueror of transition. And his, the first art, was tragic art. . . . The Yoruba metaphysics of accommodation and resolution could only come after the passage of the gods through the transitional gulf, after the demonic test of the self-will of Ogun the explorer-god in the creative cauldron of cosmic powers. Only after such testing could the harmonious Yoruba world be born, a harmonious will which accommodates every alien material or abstract phenomenon within its infinitely stressed spirituality. The artifact of Ogun's conquest of separation . . . was iron ore, symbol of earth's womb-energies, cleaver and welder of life. Ogun, through his redemptive action became the first symbol of the alliance of disparities when, from earth itself, he extracted chthonic¹⁵ chaos. In tragic consciousness the votary's psyche [i.e., the soul of the devoted follower] reaches out beyond the realm of nothingness (or spiritual chaos) which is potentially destructive of human awareness, through areas of terror and blind energies into a ritual empathy with the gods, who once preceded him in parallel awareness of their own incompleteness. Ritual anguish is

therefore experienced as that primal transmission of the god's despair—vast, numinous, always incomprehensible. . . .

It is necessary to recall again that the past is not a mystery and that although the future (the unborn) is yet unknown, it is not a mystery to the Yoruba but co-existent in present consciousness. Tragic terror exists therefore neither in the evocation of the past nor of the future. The stage of transition is, however, the metaphysical abyss both of god and man. . . . [N]othing rescues man (ancestral, living, or unborn) from loss of self within this abyss but a titanic resolution of the will whose ritual summons, response, and expression is the strange alien sound to which we give the name of music [in tragic song]. On the arena of the living, when man is stripped of excrescences, when disasters and conflicts (the material of drama) have crushed and robbed him of self-consciousness and pretensions, he stands in present reality at the spiritual edge of this gulf, he has nothing left in physical existence which successfully impresses upon his spiritual or psychic perception. It is at such moments that transitional memory takes over and intimations rack him of that intense parallel of his progress through the gulf of transition, of the dissolution of his self and his struggle and triumph over subsumation through the agency of will. It is this experience that the modern tragic dramatist recreates through the medium of physical contemporary action, reflecting emotions of the first active battle of the will through the abyss of dissolution.¹⁶ Ogun is the first actor in that battle, and Yoruba tragic drama is the reenactment of the cosmic conflict. . . .

Ogun not only dared to look into transitional essence but triumphantly bridged it with knowledge, with art, with vision and the mystic creativity of science—a total and profound hubristic assertiveness that is beyond any parallel in Yoruba experience. The penalty came

¹⁴Author's footnote: I would render this more cogently today in terms of race origination, uprooting, wandering and settling. This group experience is less remote, and parallels the mythology of primordial chaos, as well as the rites of transition (birth, death, etc.).

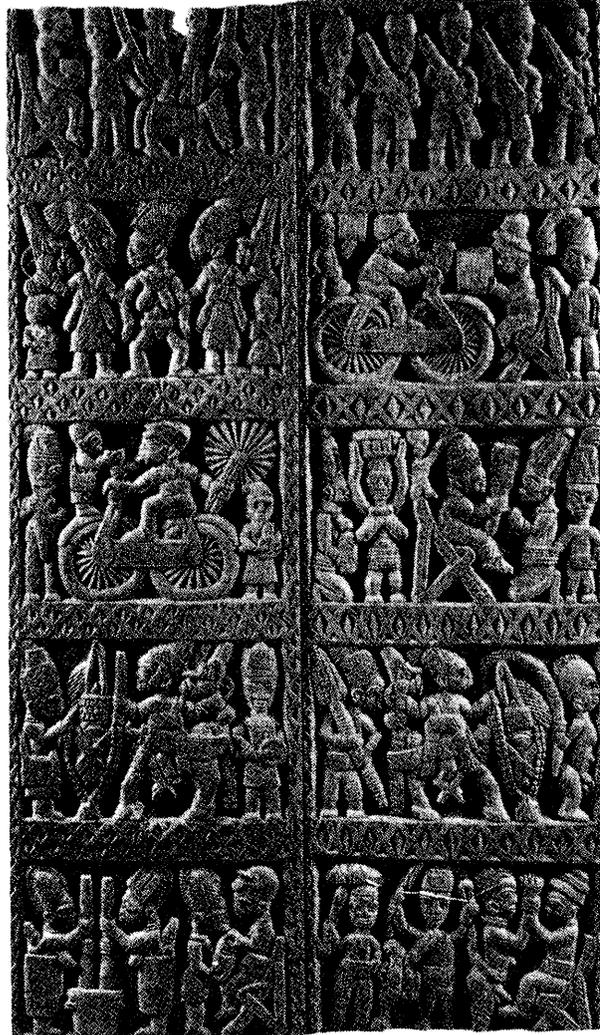
¹⁵See the discussion of "chthonic" forces on p. 14.

¹⁶ Author's footnote: Or again the collective memory of dispersion and re-assemblage in racial coming-into-being. All these, and of course the recurring experiences of birth and death, are psycho-historic motifs for tragic experience: the essence of transition.

later when, as a reward and acknowledgement of his leadership of the divinities, gods and humans joined to offer him a crown. At first he declined but later consented to the throne of Ire. At the first battle the same demonic energies were aroused, but . . . the divisions between man and man, between I and you, friend and foe, [could not] be perceived by the erstwhile hero of the transitional abyss. Enemy and subjects fell alike until Ogun alone was left, sole survivor of the narrowness of human separation. The battle is symbolic of the hindsight common alike to god and man.

Questions for Discussion

1. Retell the story of Ogun. Why does Soyinka call him “the first actor”? What deeds did this god perform? What effect did he have on the human world, and how does the human world affect, or try to affect, him? How did he come to be the god of creativity and of war as well as the god of iron?
2. Soyinka wants his own tragic dramas to enact the sufferings and actions of the Yoruba gods; he may even consider the Yoruba world-view the key to understanding all tragic drama. This raises questions about the role of belief in drama and, by extension, literature in general. If you have studied one of Soyinka’s tragic plays, how did his beliefs go into the making of the play? And how would your own attitude to those beliefs be affected by watching or directing or acting the play?
3. Identify the aspects of ritual in some other tragedy you have read—perhaps a Greek or Shakespearean play, a play by Racine, Goethe, or Beckett. How do the characters relate, or try to relate, to gods or higher forces in their universe? What does it mean that the hero dies, and how does the meaning of tragic death there compare to Soyinka’s understanding of tragic death as the re-enactment of “transition”?



Yoruba palace doors—attributed to Are-Ogun, Nigeria, Northern Ekiti region

4. In the two footnotes to his essay, Soyinka suggests that the Yoruba people’s *collective memory* of cosmic transition—for example, the separations of gods and humans, of the ancestors and the living—are memories of their long history of uprooting, migration, and resettling. In what ways might the myths and rituals Soyinka discusses be considered the “collective memory” of his people’s migrations and identity? Why, in Soyinka’s eyes, does this fact not make Yoruba myth and ritual merely symbolic? How do they enter into the Yoruba’s individual life experience?