

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NATURE OF THE ALLEGORY IN WOLE SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN*

Moffat Moyo, MA
University of Zambia, Zambia

Abstract

This work examines Wole Soyinka's use of the allegory through which he sneaks himself into the text of *Death and the King's Horseman*. Using the theory of New Historicism which claims that there is a relationship between the text and the historical milieu of the text, the paper explores Soyinka's background and relates it to the text under discussion. Particular emphasis is placed on the parallel between Soyinka and the character Olunde in the play.

It is concluded that through Olunde, Soyinka creeps into the text. This is due to the understanding that Olunde represents the African who has been to England to learn not only the English culture but also healing for his land hence returns to the healing of his land. The parallel is shown through Soyinka's studying of theatre and Olunde's studying of medicine in England.

Keywords: Autobiography, allegory, Soyinka, New Historicism

Introduction

Wole Soyinka, one of Africa's literary and theatrical giants employs myths and allegory in his works. Many have thought that he merely focuses on politics in his works. The study seeks to show how he has brought elements of the autobiography into the play *Death and the King's Horseman*. The work will explore the subject of allegory before considering Nigeria's background and Soyinka's place in it before studying the play in question while relating it to the subject's life.

Theoretical Framework **New Historicism**

This work is guided by the theory of New Historicism, which, according to Abrams (1999), is more concerned with the historicity of the text. He seems to suggest that each text is chiefly a cultural product of its own era. It is suggested in this case that the cultural product, the text cannot

entirely be seen as independent of the world, including the time and space, that it was produced in.

Writing in the Introduction to *The New Historicism* (1989), Veesper argues that through the New Historicism, academics have broken the boundaries that separated history, anthropology, art, politics, literature and economics. This, he continues, has helped humanists question all matters that affect them regardless of the discipline. The idea advanced above can easily be qualified by Foucault (2001) that “the author’s name characterizes a particular manner of existence of discourse. Discourse that possess an author’s name is not to be immediately consumed and forgotten; neither is it accorded the momentary attention given to ordinary, fleeting words. Rather, its status and its manner of reception are regulated by the culture in which it circulates.” It is important to mention here that the view expressed by Foucault above suggests that works bearing an author’s name, or authored works, are given a special status in society and are therefore created and consumed with the understanding of the culture in which they are born. The reference to the works culture in this instance is very cardinal as it points to the relationship between the work and the culture. This makes one assume, from Foucault’s argument that there is a strong link between the work and the culture that produces it.

Before pointing out the interrelations between the author, the text and the society, one precursor of New Historicism, Greenblatt (1989) says that literary criticism has terms such as allusion, allegorization and symbolization among others to link the work of art to the time and society of its basis. This implies a link between the work and the society it is tied to. To link the author and the society to the work, he continues saying that the creation of the work of art is a negotiation between the creator or creators and the institutions of society. Greenblatt here argues that the work is created in relation to the society. This approach shows that the work of art is created but with the society it represents in mind.

The New Historicism, therefore, argues that the cultural milieu is paramount in the interpretation of a literary work without disregarding the author’s relationship with the society.

This leads to discussing the major concept of this work, allegory which has already been alluded to by Greenblatt above in linking the work to the society and the author.

Allegory

With origins in the ancient world, the allegory, Cuddon (1999: 19) says, appears to be a mode of expression (a way of feeling and thinking about things and seeing them) so natural to the human mind that it is universal. In fact, de Man (1979) says that texts will always contain allusions

which in his work he has referred to as substitutions. But what really is an allegory?

Mweseli (2005: 348) in the appendix to her co-edited *Imagination of Poets; an Anthology of African Poems* says that allegory is “a literary or dramatic device in which the events of a narrative or an implied narrative obviously and continuously refer to another simultaneous structure of events or ideas, whether historical events, moral or philosophical ideas, or natural phenomena.” In other words, these events that could be seen to be all-meaning and totally complete on their own are not really complete as they refer to something else. Her use of the word ‘simultaneous’ here shows the duality of meaning in the narrative or implied narrative in a given situation. What needs to be questioned regarding Mweseli’s definition is the use of the word ‘obvious’ because it is not always clear that a work of art is operating at two levels.

For example, Booker (1996: 474) considers allegory at character level. He defines it as “a literary form in which the persons or objects described are intended to invoke another set (often of a more abstract or general nature) of persons or objects.” This definition suggests that allegory does not always have to be an easy way to explaining a literary or dramatic piece of work. Another interesting element of Booker’s definition is the use of the word ‘invoke’ which conveys the idea that it is not enough for the reader or critic to read between the lines but the text itself will excite emotional appeal and effect on the reader who will be brought to the thought of other objects or persons in the text. It is at this level that the reader will make associations between what they are reading and what they can see outside the text and draw conclusions about the representativeness of the text in question.

As has been observed from arguments by Greenblatt (1989), Foucault (2001), and Veesser (1989) among others, there exists a relationship between literature and society because literature is based on society, and that this relationship is in certain cases allegorical. It is this regard that it can be argued that not all fictive characters discussed in imaginary works are fictive. This is guided by the suggestion by Booker (1996) that an allegory could be at character level. This means that an allegory could be an object or a character substituting for another character in this case an actual human being in society.

The existence of a relationship between literature and society implies the existence of a close link between society and the artists which translates into the work of art being a mere replica of society. The writer picks actual names of social members as the material for his work. He picks on actual issues going on in his society as what the society will identify with in the consumption of the product. It is at this level that the argument takes root

that every literary piece of work is allegorical. These arguments summed up with de Man's (1979) submission that all texts contain substitution, one comes to a conclusion that at every literary work is to a larger extent allegorical.

Soyinka

Wole Soyinka, according to Shorter (1998) is Africa's leading playwright, who also happens to be a poet, novelist, essayist, memoirist, librettist, lecturer, nonfiction writer, editor, and biographer, born in Ìsarà, Nigeria in 1934. According to Wilatec (2006), Soyinka, as a child became increasingly aware of the pull between African tradition and Western modernization. Most people in his village, Aké, were from the Yoruba tribe and were presided over by the *ogboni*, or tribal elders. His grandfather introduced him to the pantheon of Yoruba gods and other figures of tribal folklore. His parents, however, were representatives of colonial influence: his mother was a devout Christian convert, and his father was a headmaster at the village school established by the British. At this stage, as shown by Wilatec, Soyinka already had the two cultures inherent in him. This condition was further enthused by the education he received both at home, in Nigeria, and in England. As the discussion progresses, it shall be seen that Soyinka has this combination of cultures clearly reflected in his writings.

Moore (1978) in his *Wole Soyinka* further says that no African writer or intellectual can avoid involvement in public affairs. On this subject, Wilatec (2006) says that Soyinka was arrested in 1965 after being accused of using a gun to force a radio announcer to broadcast incorrect election results. There was no evidence to attest to that. Therefore, the writers' organization, PEN, protested and, after three months, Soyinka was released.

The most outstanding instance of his involvement in public activities was his attempt to broker a deal between the warring factions in 1967. This was during the Biafran civil war. What angered Soyinka was the government's brutal policies towards Ibos who were attempting to form their own country, Biafra. He then travelled to Biafra to establish a peace commission composed of leading intellectuals from both sides of the conflict. The Nigerian police accused Soyinka of assisting the Biafrans to purchase jet fighters. This led to his two-year imprisonment with no formal charges.

Soyinka began a period of self-imposed exile in 1993 when General Ibrahim Babangida refused to allow a democratic government to take power. Babangida, who appointed General Sani Abacha as head of the Nigerian state, charged the pro-democracy individuals, one of whom was Soyinka, with treason due to their criticism of the military regime. Facing a death

sentence prompted Soyinka to leave the country in 1994 and spend time lecturing in European and American universities.

Soyinka has held teaching positions at a number of prestigious universities, including the University of Ghana, Cornell University, and Yale University. He also served as the Goldwin Smith professor for African Studies and Theatre Arts at Cornell University from 1988 to 1991. Soyinka has received several awards for his work, such as the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 and the Enrico Mattei Award for Humanities in 1986.

Amongst the many writers looking at Soyinka, Jones (1988) seems to have done the most comprehensive study of the writer. He looks at Yoruba mythology in general as he studies the Yoruba culture that includes their occupations and festivals. After that he goes on to talk about Christian and other influences on Soyinka, and later at Soyinka's basic concerns.

Jones sees Soyinka as being attached to modernity by work experience and education while it is his background that is imbedded in the Yoruba culture. He goes on to say that apart from this relation, Soyinka has also taken deep interest in Yoruba studies. This has led to his works having both European and African (Yoruba) traditions deeply rooted in them.

He says that Soyinka's basic concern, passionately and desperately, is for society. This concern is not only literary as can be seen from his involvement in politics. It is for this reason that Jones has ended by saying that generally, Soyinka's works appreciate life and deprecate the opposite such as war.

To the views of Jones (1988) above, Moore (1978) adds as an already known fact that "Soyinka's work is linked with certain events and experiences of his life that the critic cannot write of it, beyond the level of mere description, without making some attempt to link the two" (pg 1). This view could lead one to suggesting that Moore sees Soyinka's writing to be to a certain extent biographical. This could be the reason why he argues that it is not possible to look at his works in isolation from his life. It is further married by the introductory statement on the Soyinka segment of this paper that he has had some involvement in public life.

McPheron (1998) says that Wole Soyinka is among contemporary Africa's greatest writers. He is also one of the continent's most imaginative advocates of native culture and of the humane social order it embodies. He sees Soyinka's work employing an approach that would lead to liberating black Africa from its crippling legacy of European imperialism. McPheron therefore says Soyinka envisioned a "New Africa" that would escape its colonial past by grafting the technical advances of the present onto the stock of its own ancient traditions. Native myth, reformulated to accommodate contemporary reality, was to be the foundation of the future, opening the way to "self-retrieval, cultural recollection, and cultural security". He says

Soyinka dreamed instead of a truly de-colonized continent, where an autonomous African culture assimilated only those progressive elements of recent history that were consistent with its own authentic identity.

On Soyinka's style, McPherson says that his discordant mixing of genres, his wilful ambiguities of meaning, his unresolved clashes of contradictions cease to be aesthetic flaws as Western critics often label them. Instead, they become our path into an African reality fiercely itself and *utterly other* when looked at but from the angle of his connection with the mythic world. His conclusion, regarding Soyinka is that his plays, novels, poetry, and critical essays only peripherally prepare the reader for his autobiography. Rich description, elaborate scenes and fascinating characters are interwoven in a narrative style laced with side-splitting humour and luxurious poignancy.

Allegory in *Death and the King's Horseman*

Death and the King's Horseman is a play based on actual events that took place in Oyo the ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria in 1946. *Death and the King's Horseman* is therefore an historical play whose parallels with society should be looked at with care because it is an actual representation of what has taken place before. Soyinka could be seen as having re-enacted an actual event and not talking about other issues allegorically.

Notwithstanding this idea, as it has already been stated, this play based on the 1946 events has been set about three years earlier. The alteration of such details has a bearing on this study and hence the understanding of the play. The changing of the details makes this be more of a creative piece of work and not a mere recreation of historical events. Soyinka, in this play, creates a play that is 'merely based' on events that took place. He does not play the role of a historian whose purpose is not to embellish the narration but to narrate events as they took place. Soyinka's is to focus on the aesthetics of the work apart from recounting facts.

The above cause makes this play be seen not in terms of history alone but chiefly in line with creativity and hence making it a piece of literary art for an audience to consume. The work is therefore expected to say what could not have been said by the playwright plainly such as criticism of the governments.

Having mentioned that, the paper will therefore now investigate instances that portray duality of meanings, that is to say those instances that could be allegorical in the text. There is need to mention that the focus of this paper is the autobiographical nature of the allegory in the play, that is the author 'sneaks' into the play as a character.

The discussion of Wole Soyinka's biography showed that the Nobel Prize winning playwright was born in Africa but obtained education both at

home in Nigeria and abroad in England. This combination of two cultures in his growing up has appeared in his works. This same combination has been said to be his strength. He has been seen as a symbiosis of African and English traditions inherent within him. Soyinka can then be regarded as a midpoint between African in general and Nigeria in particular, on one hand and Europe in general and England in particular on the other. It would then be argued that where there is a clash of cultures, it is Soyinka who would be taken as an intermediary between Africa and Europe. This could be the reason why Soyinka himself says that this play should not be seen as a clash of cultures. To him doing this is wrong because two cultures are seen as being given equal prominence when it is clear that of the two cultures, one is indigenous while the other is alien and the indigenous seems to be an equal of the alien culture yet on its own soil.

Soyinka has argued that *Death and the King's Horseman* is not about a clash of cultures. This is because he believes that this can be solved as there is an intermediary in Olunde. Olunde is a young man who has been sent to England to study medicine. The teaching of medicine to Olunde has a semi-duo meaning in the text. It gives the meaning that Olunde is a subject of modernisation. Olunde is clearly being inducted into the English culture and yet it is clear that he is responsible for the continuation of the Yoruba culture being a first son of King's horseman, Elesin Oba. The sending to a modern institution of such people is the deliberate cultural dilution of a group of people. One wonders why it actually had to be done so forcefully. Pilkings, the District Officer sends Olunde away from Nigeria without the consent of the parent. This shows disregard for indigenous culture by the 'aliens', in the words of Soyinka. It therefore is Pilkings's idea that with the sending away of the person at the centre of the continuation of the culture, there is a complete break and hence death of a tradition.

Yet, when looked at closely, this sending of Olunde to England is for the sake of healing. Olunde has been sent to England to study (we can as well say *learn*) medicine. The whole essence of learning medicine is to be a healer. Since there can never be a healer if there is no sickness, we can well argue that Pilkings sees the African society as a sick society in need of healing. He sees one of their own is the best to bring about this healing. We should hence agree that Olunde is the one who will one day come in and heal this ailing society once he has learnt medicine. The medicine that Olunde learnt is not mentioned except in his telling of what he has learnt in terms of sacrifice and wastage of human life in line with sacrifice. Olunde says that he has seen greed in the actions of the generals who remain at home and send young people to fight in the war. He believes that the Europeans have no right to call African customs barbaric when they are not any different from theirs.

[...]JOLUNDE (mildly): And that is the good cause for which you desecrate the 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 spent four years among your people. I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand.

JANE: Oh. So you've returned with a chip on your shoulder. That a pity Olunde. I am sorry.

(An uncomfortable silence follows.)

I take it then that you did not find your stay in England altogether edifying.

OLUNDE: I don't say that. I found your people quite admirable in many ways, their conduct and courage in this war for instance [...] you white people 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 one another, wiping out their so-called civilisation for all time and reverting to a state of primitivism the likes 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 realised 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 mastered the art of calling things by names which don't remotely describe them.

JANE: You talk! You people with your long-winded, roundabout way of making conversation.

OLUNDE: Mrs Pilkings, whatever we do, we never suggest a thing is the opposite of what it really is. In your newsreels I heard defeats, thorough, murderous defeats described as strategic victories. No wait, it wasn't just on your newsreels. Don't forget I was attached to hospitals all the time. Hordes of your wounded passed through those wards. I spoke to them. I spent long evenings by their bedside while they spoke terrible truths of the realities of that war. I know now how history is made.

In this passage, Soyinka shows the learning of Olunde and his conclusion of the lifestyle of the whites and their view of other cultures. He does not criticise their culture but is able to say what is wrong in their culture for instance when it comes to the war which he believes is a path to primitivism. Olunde's idea is that it is primitive to have a war like this that leads to the white race being wiped out. He goes on to say that living like this is primitive and pointing to the fact that whites thought of primitivism only when they thought about Africans.

This learning of Olunde we see in the play is clearly Soyinka's own. It becomes clear as one reads that just like Benson (1618 in *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* includes himself and Jones as Hercules and Daedalus respectively, Soyinka also brings himself into this text. Shakespeare has also been seen to introduce himself in his concluding work, *The Tempest* where Prospero ends the play declaring that all the charms he has are overdone and all he has now is his own power.

The reasons that lead to the conclusion that there is Soyinka's presence in the text is the multiplicity of the similarities between Olunde and Soyinka himself. In the first place, Olunde is noticed as being brilliant in school by Pilkings. This implies that Olunde was in an academic institution in Nigeria before being sent to England. The idea that he was sent to study medicine shows that Olunde was sent only for university education implying that he had already done his high school education. This is evident in Soyinka who did the first part of his education in Nigeria before proceeding to England for his further education. This implies that Soyinka would be exposed to the English culture which would be seen as an attempt to wipe out his 'tribal memory'. While Olunde is expected to be the custodian of the

culture in the absence of his father, the symbol of continuity of culture, Soyinka was introduced by his grandfather to the pantheon of Yoruba gods and other figures of tribal folklore which should be seen as a symbol of continuation. In both, it can be said, there is that element of continuity.

While in England, Olunde learns the culture of the whites. He does not despise them but sees that there is something admirable about their culture though he is still able to pick out what is important. He praises the captain who sacrifices his life for the sake of the people. He sees this as something worth it. Soyinka similarly gets aspects of the English culture that he shows in his drama. He is one poet cum dramatist who has been praised for effectively weaving both the African as well as English literary conventions in his works.

While it is expected that Olunde will sacrifice his life for the sake of not only his culture but also his people, he does it long before the coming of his time. Olunde takes the role of his father when his father delays in doing it. Similarly, Soyinka sacrifices his life when he notices that the lives of the people of Nigeria are at stake when dictatorship takes root in the country. He tries to broker a deal between warring parties for the sake of his country's freedom. Soyinka shows a non-selfish move when he is sent to jail and still stands his ground and believes he has to fight for his country. The Promethean myth that he portrays in his *The Man Died* as discussed by Munatamba (1981) in his paper *The Promethean Myth in Soyinka's The Man Died*, shows Soyinka to be a giver to his society. Just as Prometheus stole fire for humans, Soyinka fights for freedom for the people of Nigeria. He is held without trial for two years and released only upon the outcry from the international community. The recording of his experiences as shown in *The Man Died* and *A Shuttle in the Crypt* is convincing enough that this is an act of sacrifice for both his land its people. That is what he is to his society as this is the same element brought out in *Death and the King's Horseman*.

We can therefore conclude that Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman* shows himself to the world. He shows what is expected of him and how really he sees himself. He therefore explains that even though he is seen as a meeting point for different cultural expectations, Soyinka is a symbol of continuity regarding African culture.

Writers such as Moore (1978), Jones (1988), and Wilatec (2006) say that Soyinka is interested in public affairs. They say he is interested in taking part in activities that affect people in general. In his *The Writer in a Modern State* (1988), Soyinka argues that the writer has a role to play in the activities of governments. This could equally mean that the writer's writing should have a bearing on the happenings of society. Other works of Soyinka such as his *The Beatification of Area Boy* and *King Baabu* have been said to satirise the Abacha regime in Nigeria and military tyrants in general, (Banham,

2005). This could mean that Soyinka sees his involvement in these public affairs as a crucial objective in his writing. It is therefore imperative to look for any expected political allegorical elements in his *Death and the King's Horseman*.

On the medicine that Olunde goes to study (or learn) in England, it has been argued already that Olunde's involvement in medicine is meant to bring healing to a sick society. It is not surprising to see Wole Soyinka, in England, studying theatre. It would not be surprising to equate theatre to the study of medicine as theatre works as a means of healing of a people if one considered the role of transformation played by theatre. Okgabu (1998) suggests that Theatre for Development and its associated acts such as Theatre for the Oppressed primarily aim at social transformation. The same would be said if one considered the cathartic function played by tragedy helps people outpour their emotions. Aristotle (2005) says that this leaves the audience feeling relieved at the end of the play. Above all, Theatre for Development, an element of which Soyinka who was introduced to theatre at a very tender age (Omotoso, 2004) practiced later in Nigeria under guerilla theatre is meant to cure a society of its sickness. It would still be argued based on the above parallels that the student Olunde in England substitutes Wole Soyinka in England being prepared to take up his task on return to Nigeria.

Conclusion

This work has shown that there is a relationship between the arts and society and that the relationship also emanates from the fact that art is based on the society that not only creates and but also consumes it. The work has also shown that Soyinka is rooted in both African and European being. This, in relation to Soyinka's artistry has led to the interpretation that works of art that are based on society and carry authors in their interpretation have elements of allegory in them. Upon further considering the parallels between Wole Soyinka and the character Olunde in *Death and the King's Horseman*. It would be argued, considering the portrayal of Olunde that Soyinka could be suggesting that even though he is as a meeting point for different cultural expectations, Soyinka is a symbol of continuity regarding African culture. One could suggest that this could be the reason why Jefiyo (2004) has categorized it as one of the 'weightier plays' in relation to the historical appropriateness of the subject.

References:

Primary Texts

Soyinka, W. (1975). *Death and the King's Horseman*. London; Methuen Publishing Limited

Supporting Texts

- Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms (7th Ed.)*. Australia: Heinle & Heinle
- Aristotle (2005). *Poetics*. (Ed. and Trans. by Halliwell, S). Cambridge; Havard University Press
- Banham, M. (2005). “Back to Before; Soyinka’s Stagecraft in The Beautification of Area Boy & King Baabu” in Banham, M. et al. (2005). *African Theatre: Soyinka. Blackout, Blowout & Beyond; Satirical Revue Sketches*. Oxford; James Currey
- Booker, M. K. (1996). *A Practical Introduction to Literary Theory and Criticism*. New York: Longman Publishers USA
- Cuddon, J. A. (1999). *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Middlesex; Penguin Books
- de Man, P. (1979). *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven and London; Yale University Press
- Foucault, M. (2001). ‘What Is an Author?’ in Leitch, V. (ed.) *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. London: W. W. Norton & Company Ltd.
- Greenblatt, S. (1989). ‘Towards a Poetics of Culture’ in Veenser, H. (Ed.). *The New Historicism*. London; Routledge
- Jeyifo, B. (2004). *Wole Soyinka: Politics, Poetics and Postcolonialism*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press
- Jones, E. (1973). “Wole Soyinka: Critical Perspectives” in Wright, E. ed. *The Critical Evaluation of African Literature*. London; Heinemann Educational Books Ltd
- Jones, E. D. 1988. *The Writing of Wole Soyinka*. London; Heinemann Educational Books
- Jonson, B. (1618). “Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue” in Orgel, S. ed. (1969) *Ben Jonson: The Complete Masques*. London; Yale University Press
- Kirszner, L. G. and Mandell, S. R. (2004). *Literature; Reading, Reacting, Writing (5th Ed.)*. Heinle
- McPheron, W. (1998) *Wole Soyinka*. Stanford University. Retrieved from <http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/soyinka/> on 20.04.09
- Munatamba, P. (1981). *The Promethean Myth in Soyinka’s The Man Died*. in Zango
- Mweseli, M. (2005) “Appendix” in Onochie, S. Et al (Eds.). (2005). *Imagination of Poets; an Anthology of African Poems*. Port Harcourt-Agbor-Benin: Penpower Communication Co
- Okgabu, O. (1998). ‘Product or Process: Theatre for Development in Africa in Salhi, K. (Ed.). *African Theatre for Development: Art for Self Determination*. Bristol; Intellect Books

- Omotoso, K. (2004). 'Concepts of history and theatre in Africa' in Banham, M. (Ed.). *A History of Theatre in Africa*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press
- Roberts, E. V. and Jacobs, H. E. (2007). *Literature; an Introduction to Reading and Writing (8th Ed.)*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall
- Shorter, A. (1998). *African Culture; an Overview. Social-Cultural Anthropology*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa
- Veesser, H. (Ed.). (1989). *The New Historicism*. London; Routledge
- Wole Soyinka. Retrieved from <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/soyinka.htm> on 20.04.09