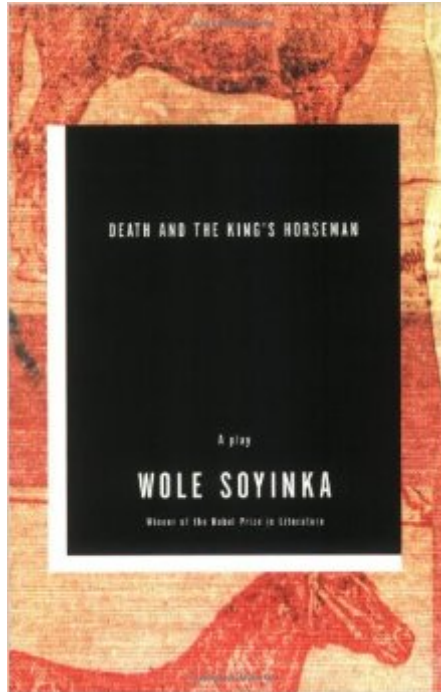


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# Death And The King's Horseman: A Play



## Synopsis

A Nobel Prize-winning playwright's classic tale of tragic decisions in a traditional African culture. Based on events that took place in Oyo, an ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria, in 1946, Wole Soyinka's powerful play concerns the intertwined lives of Elesin Oba, the king's chief horseman; his son, Olunde, now studying medicine in England; and Simon Pilkings, the colonial district officer. The king has died and Elesin, his chief horseman, is expected by law and custom to commit suicide and accompany his ruler to heaven. The stage is set for a dramatic climax when Pilkings learns of the ritual and decides to intervene and Elesin's son arrives home.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I read this book in 1996, and I still remember almost every detail because it was so stirring, so moving. It is about pride and obligations and how the two shape one's role in society. It made me review my own definitions of these two things, my own life in different societies. I'm delighted to have read this book and will be reading it many times over.

I like Soyinka's mind, but not too keen of most of his writings. Maybe because of the unnecessary difficulty level, not speaking directly to this play though. This was an ok read. After reading the likes of *Nervous Conditions*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, *The River Between* I was expecting more. Great themes in this one though. I don't know what it is, for some reason that pizzazz is missing.~~Montage is author of *The Women of Sugar Hill* & Duggan, as well as producer of the

upcoming documentary, *Street Life: Changing Faces*

Thought the book was pretty good, I'll admit it was for a class, but I thought the book kept a decent plot. I liked that there was a second play after the *Death and the Kings Horsemen* that explained much of what went on in the background and unseen. It explained more of the characters actions. The criticism of the book was dry and didn't say much that one couldn't pick up from the play itself. Rather few characters so it made the play simple. Surprised at how short the play was. Only about 65 pages plus about 18 for the second play. Most the book is criticism.

At a university seminar in the US recently, Prof. Soyinka was asked to respond to charges by certain critics that his writing wasn't 'African' enough. He responded, saying "The people who say these things, I refer to as neo-Tarzanists, people whose Africa is the Africa of Tarzan, swinging from tree to tree. That's not my Africa", he said, to a standing, thunderous ovation. It is difficult to imagine a writer in English today with a wider grasp of the language. Some of his work is unbelievable - metaphor, irony, the supernatural, interwoven with tragedy, lyricism, and language. Top-draw.

On the page, the play did not amaze me. But Soyinka was a guest artist at NYU in I think 2005, and this play was presented to honor his appointment. It opened my eyes very wide. Soyinka understood how Greek tragedy, with its incompatible elements of huge choral scenes and arias, interspersed with intimate scenes of stichomythia, was supposed to work, and the NYU production brought it out. I had the "aha" or in this context the "eureka" experience over and over, and I will never forget the experience. On the page I suppose the reader has to imagine the big scenes filled with African dance and drumming, and then the quiet Ibsenian-realism scenes--which in this play often feature the Prince of Wales and his bride--but it's easier to have had the experience in person. The mythology Soyinka uses is Yoruba, not Greek. Zeus is not a participant. But we got all this mythology from Africa anyway. And it's not such a stretch to take the thing in. I think scholars mostly agree that Hellenic culture came from Crete, and Crete got its culture from Africa, so Soyinka is merely guiding us back to our roots. I recommend the play whole-heartedly, but I sincerely hope you get to see a good production. It's the same case as Shakespeare, tedious on the page, electrifying on the stage.

Be sure to read the author's note, because if you don't, you might take it as an East vs. West, colonial vs. tribal, new vs. old story as it would appear on first reading. But in his note, Soyinka

states that the "threnodic essence" of the work is a theme even more universal: "the numinous passage which links all: transition." Change is indeed common to us all, and as my mother-in-law points out, change is usually perceived as bad. Yet change is something we all must come to terms with, and since one of literature's great benefits is to act as a mental dress rehearsal for life, this lean play (accessible on first reading, yet rich enough to reread) should find a place on every thoughtful reader's shelf. The university-educated Soyinka (as one can infer from the author's note) has quite the erudite vocabulary, yet the prose style of *Death and the King's Horseman* reminded me more of ancient Greek tragedy in translation than anything else: simple yet poetic phrasing, and the homespun proverbial sayings of a pre-industrial age. What struck me as an information-age Westerner was how many of these Yoruba sayings (being related to animals or farming) were hard to relate to; an incidental lesson of this book was how detached from the natural world I've become. Visiting nature for recreation isn't the same as having your livelihood dependent on it. Another aspect of this play that happens to be particularly interesting in juxtaposition to the film juggernaut of *Avatar* is that neither the Nigerian characters nor the English are portrayed as completely right or wrong, sympathetic or not. Sure, the English come off as somewhat ignorant intruders, yet they act in good faith; conversely, Elesin, the protagonist, initially appears heroic but as events unfold he grows less so. Whereas in *Avatar* the modern Westerners are evil caricatures and the Na'vi noble savages, in Soyinka's work matters are more nuanced--more like real life.

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