



Death And The King's Horseman

WOLE SOYINKA


Author

- ▶ Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka was born in Ijebu Isara, near Akeokuta in western Nigeria, on July 13, 1934. His parents, who were from different Yoruba-speaking ethnic groups, were Christians, but other relatives observed African beliefs and deities.
- ▶ Nigeria was at the time a colony of [Great Britain](#). Soyinka grew up, therefore, with exposure to both Yoruban and Western culture. At twenty he left Nigeria to attend the University of Leeds in England, a university with a strong drama program.
- ▶ After graduation he joined London's Royal Court Theatre as a script-reader and then as a writer, and produced his first play, *The Swamp Dwellers*, there in 1959.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

► A Nation in Turmoil

- When Soyinka wrote *Death and the King's Horseman* in 1974 he was living in exile from Nigeria, lecturing at Churchill College of Cambridge University in England. The preceding years had been difficult for Nigeria, and for Soyinka personally. In 1967, the southeastern area of Nigeria declared itself the independent [Republic of Biafra](#), and a civil war erupted.
- Soyinka believed that the government policies toward Biafra were unjust, and he said as much in letters to the editors of national publications. Soyinka was arrested in 1967 and held without charges for two years and two months. For fifteen of those months, he was in solitary confinement.

- 
- ▶ According to many critics, his attention shifted after his imprisonment. Whereas previously he had written about the negative effects of the colonial powers on the colonized, he now addressed weakness and corruption wherever he found it.
 - ▶ In particular, he was concerned with exploring the ways in which Africans treated each other unjustly, and the ways in which his own community had betrayed itself.
 - ▶ *Death and the King's Horseman* is a play that reflects this later vision, as Soyinka himself insists in his Author's Note.

CHARACTERS

► Amusa

- Amusa is a sergeant in the native administration police, a black African working for the white British colonialists.
- His position is a difficult one: he is not trusted by Simon Pilkings, his superior, because Simon cannot conceive of an African as being intelligent or honest, and he is no longer trusted by the villagers because he works with the whites to enforce “the laws of strangers.”
- Amusa was converted to Christianity two years before the play begins, but he still feels profound respect for native beliefs.
- He will not speak with Simon so long as Simon is wearing the *egungun* garments, but Amusa does not hesitate to follow Simon’s orders and arrest Elesin to prevent his suicide.



► **Bride**

- The Bride does not speak at all during the play. Already engaged to Iyaloja's son, the Bride is seen by Elesin and taken to bed by him; no one asks for her consent. When Elesin is arrested she sits silently beside him, and upon his death she closes his eyes in fulfillment of her wifely duty.



► Iyaloja

- Iyaloja is the Mother of the market, the spokesperson and leader of the women of the village. She is the voice of wisdom in the play, the one who can see beyond Elesin's charms to the danger he represents when he swerves from his responsibility.
- When Elesin asks for the young woman as his Bride, Iyaloja has no choice but to hand her over, even though the young woman is engaged to Iyaloja's own son.
- Iyaloja knows the power of the forces of the universe, and she understands that refusing the request of a man who is "already touched by the waiting fingers of our departed" will "set this world adrift." But she warns Elesin not to leave a cursed seed behind him, and she reminds him of her warning when she brings Olunde's body to Elesin's cell.

►



► **Elesin Oba**

- Elesin Oba, a man of “enormous vitality,” was the chief horseman of the dead king. As the king’s companion, Elesin enjoyed a luxurious life of rich food and fine clothing, the rewards of a man of his position.
- He enjoyed that life, and now that the king has been dead for a month and is ready for burial Elesin is expected to complete the horseman’s duty and commit ritual suicide.
- The play opens on the evening of Elesin’s last day of life; at midnight he will die. He says repeatedly that he is ready to give his life, and he knows the importance of fulfilling his responsibility.



► **Jane Pilkings**

- Jane is the wife of Simon Pilkings, the British district officer. Although she shares most of Simon's superior attitudes, she is, in Oluide's words, "somewhat more understanding" than her husband.
- Unlike Simon, she can sense that Simon has offended Amusa and Joseph (the house servant), although she agrees with Simon that the native customs and beliefs are "horrible."
- She has no active role in the main events of the play, but serves as a sounding board for Simon as he thinks things through.
-



► **Simon Pilkings**

- Simon is the district officer, charged with maintaining order in the one district of the British colony of Nigeria. He has no interest in learning about the Africans and their culture.
- He and his wife Jane socialize only with other Europeans, who have tried to transplant as much of their own food, clothing, and manners as they can to maintain their own style of life in a foreign country.




► **Praise-Singer**


- The Praise-Singer (also known as Olohun-iyo) accompanies Elesin on his last journey, singing and chanting. He is devoted to Elesin, and sees into the darkest corners of his heart. Almost like a conscience, he voices Elesin's hesitations and questions about his passage into the next world.
- As Elesin enters his trance to begin the transition, the Praise-Singer monitors his progress. He can sense Elesin moving away from him, and calls him back in a ritual, repetitive chant. Once Elesin is arrested and brought to his cell, the Praise-Singer is not seen nor heard again.





Death and the King's Horseman Summary of Act I


- ▶ [Elesin](#) and his drummers and praise-singers enter the market. The vendors are packing up their stalls and getting ready to go home.
- ▶ The praise-singer asks Elesin why he moves with such haste, and asks him if since he is going to meet his bride, if he has forgotten the mother of his children. Elesin laughs and says he must see his women because he has neglected them. The praise-singer wonders if there will be anyone like himself on the other side. Elesin urges him to remain at his side while they are in this world.

- 
- The praise-singer calls out that Elesin's name will "be like the sweet berry" and the "world will never spit it out" (10).
 - Elesin tells him to come along to visit his women, and that he looks forward to smelling them and feeling them. The praise-singer sings of the time when white slavers came and took the best of their race –the "mind and muscle of our race" (10).
 - Despite this, he sings, "our world was never wrenched from its true course" (10). Elesin says the world will not leave its course during his time.

- 
- ➔ Elesin begins to speak of the "Not-I bird". First, he starts to dance, and the drummer plays along. He chants the story in an easy, amiable manner. While he speaks the women, including [lyaloja](#), arrive.
 - ➔ In Elesin's story death comes calling, and the farmer, the hunter, the courtesan, and others say "Not I" when death seeks them. The refrain is even heard among the beasts of the forest, and among the gods themselves.
 - ➔ But when that same Not-I bird comes to Elesin, he is not afraid and rolls out his welcome mat. The bird flies away and will not be heard in his lifetime. Elesin concludes, "My rein is loosened. I am master of my Fate" (14). He will not turn aside or delay.

- 
- The women ask if anything will hold him back and he says no, that he goes to keep his friend and master company. They did great things together, but now, as Elesin explains, "Life has an end. A life that will outlive fame and friendship begs another name" (15). Because life is honor, it ends when honor does.
 - When the women say they know him for a man of honor, Elesin suddenly gets angry. The women whisper and ask why he is offended. Iyaloja, the mother of the marketplace, asks what they did wrong.
 - Elesin asks them if his body looks like a vagrant's. Iyaloja replies that she is confused. The praise-singer steps in and warns him gently that when the child is remorseful, the strictest father relents.


- 
- ▶ Elesin points to his ungainly clothes and laughs, and the women realize he was joking and needs his rich attire. Iyaloja dances around him, pleased that he forgave them. He is attired in elegant clothing while the women sing about meeting him in the great market.
 - ▶ Elesin, dressed in finery, states that the world is good and the women tell him they know he will leave it as such. He knows he will follow the umbilical cord of the world to its origin, and will find his roots.



He glimpses a beautiful girl, and stops to ask if he is still in the market he knows and loves. Confused, the praise-singer tells him of course he is, and that it is still his voice, not that of some acolyte in heaven. Elesin continues to muse, saying his whole life he has always had whatever he wanted, especially with women. The praise-singer replies that no one doubts his reputation.


➤ Elesin turns to Iyaloja and asks about the woman he saw, waxing poetic on her beauty. Iyaloja replies that she is betrothed. Elesin is annoyed and wonders why she said that. Quickly, the woman says she did not mean to offend him.

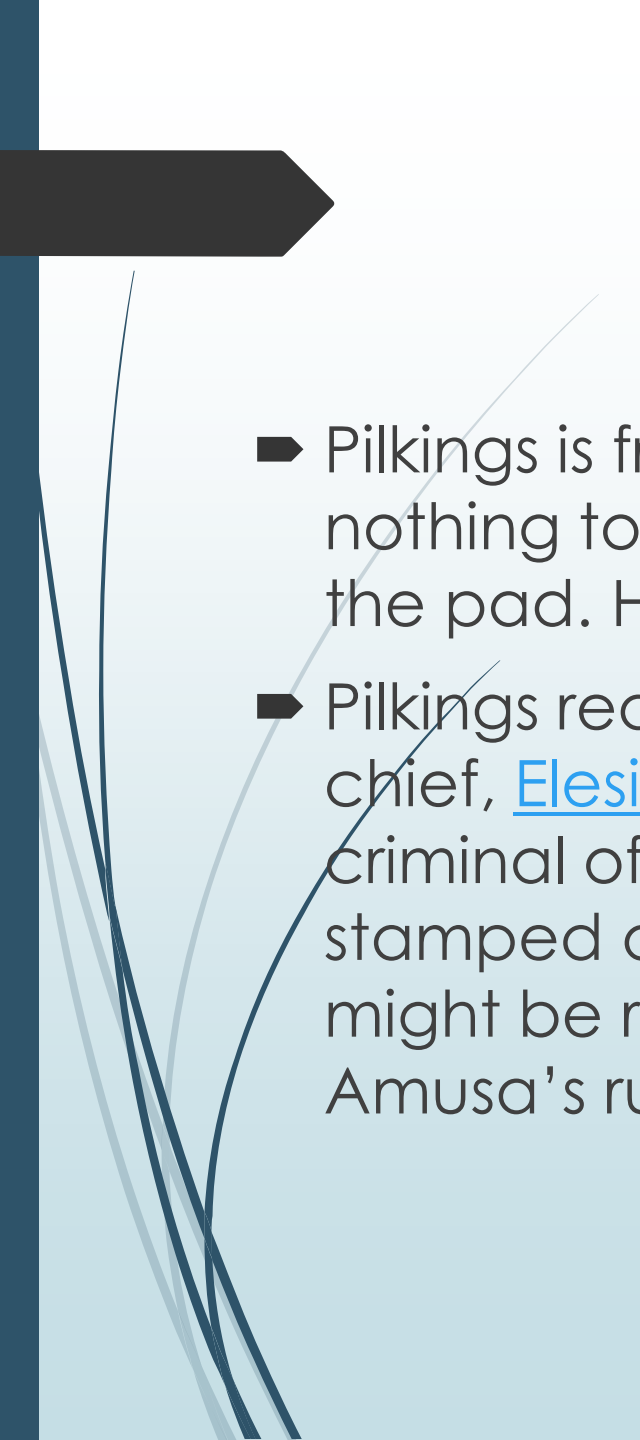
➤ She just does not see the need to ruin another's happiness. The women ask what is going on and realize that the man the girl is betrothed to is her own son. She decides not to make things difficult for Elesin as he travels to the next world, however, and turns back to him to tell him he will not be burdened as he journeys on.


- 
- She tells him it is good that "your last strength be ploughed back into the womb that gave you being" (22). Elesin is pleased, chiding her that her eyes were clouded at first. She agrees but says the fruit of this union will be of both worlds. She then warns him to make sure he goes through with his sacrifice, and he is a bit piqued.
 - She prepares to leave to get his bridal chamber ready, and adds that "these same hands will lay your shrouds" (23), to which Elesin asks, annoyed, if she has to be so blunt.
 - The bride is led in and kneels before Elesin.

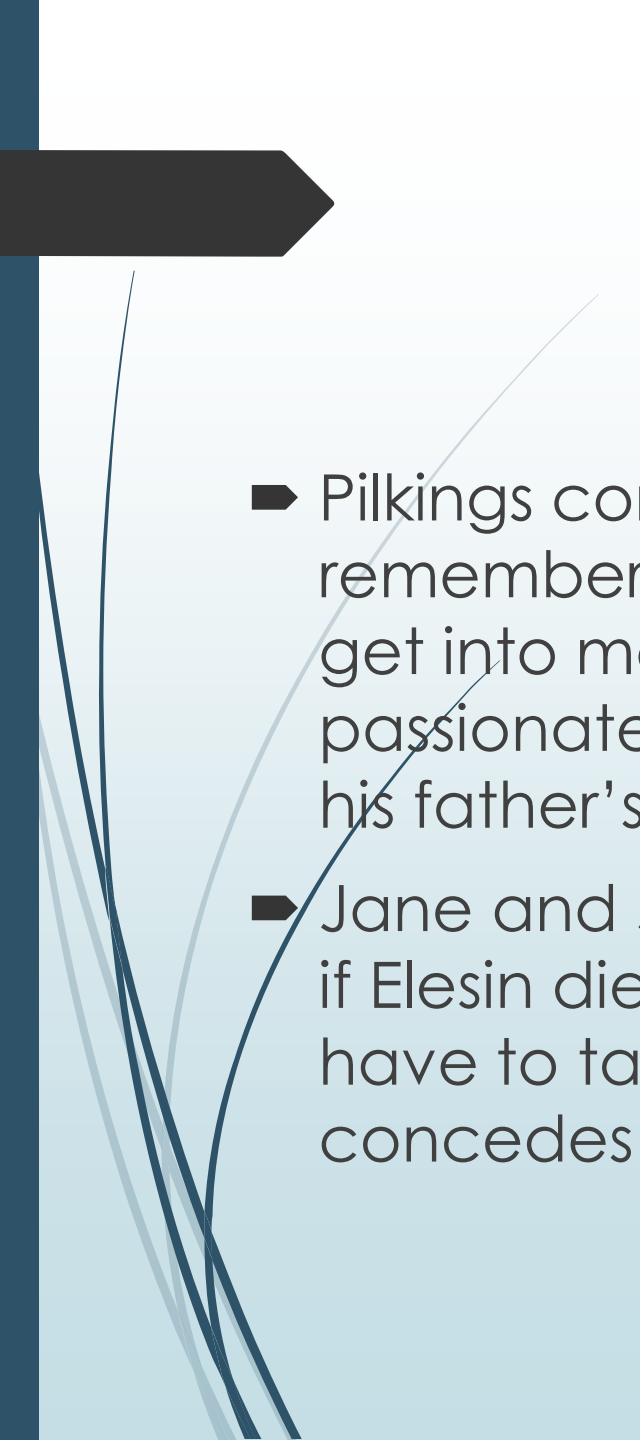
Summary of Act II


- ▶ The District Officer, Simon [Pilkings](#), and his wife, [Jane Pilkings](#), are dancing together on the verandah of their bungalow. They are wearing *egungun* costumes. One of the Native Administration policemen, [Amusa](#), comes up, sees what they are wearing, and accidentally turns over a flowerpot in his distress.
- ▶ Pilkings asks what the matter is, and Jane tells him it is their dress. Pilkings takes off his mask and chides Amusa, asking if he really believes that nonsense. Scared, Amusa replies that the outfit belongs to the cult of the dead. He begs them to take the costumes off, but they refuse, as they are going to a ball soon.


- 
- ▶ Jane tells her husband it does not look like Amusa can talk to them like this, but Pilkings, annoyed, says Amusa needs to remember he is a policeman in His Majesty's Government, and he orders Amusa to report his business.
 - ▶ Amusa stammers, "How can man talk against death to person in uniform of death?" (25). Jane tries to reason with him, asking how he can be scared of the costume, especially as he saw it confiscated from the *egungun* men who were causing trouble in town. Amusa, quietly, says he will arrest the men but not touch the costumes at all.

- 
- Pilkings is frustrated; he says that when they get like this there is nothing to be done. They leave the room so Amusa can write on the pad. He then leaves.
 - Pilkings reads what he wrote and tells Jane. It seems a prominent chief, [Elesin](#) Oba, is going to commit ritual suicide, which is a criminal offense. Pilkings muses that he thought all this was stamped out, but it is always there under the surface. He says it might be rumors, to which Jane replies that she thought he felt Amusa's rumors were unreliable.

- 
- ▶ Jane asks if he ought to talk to Elesin before arresting him, especially as this evidence seems uncorroborated. Pilkings calls in [Joseph](#), his houseboy. He asks Jane about the drums in the distance, if they sound different. He knows the natives always want to make a racket, but it seems unsettling.
 - ▶ Joseph comes in and Pilkings asks if he is Christian and if this outfit bothers him. Joseph replies that he is and it does not. Pilkings asks about the chief, and Joseph says the man will not kill himself but will simply die because it is the custom.

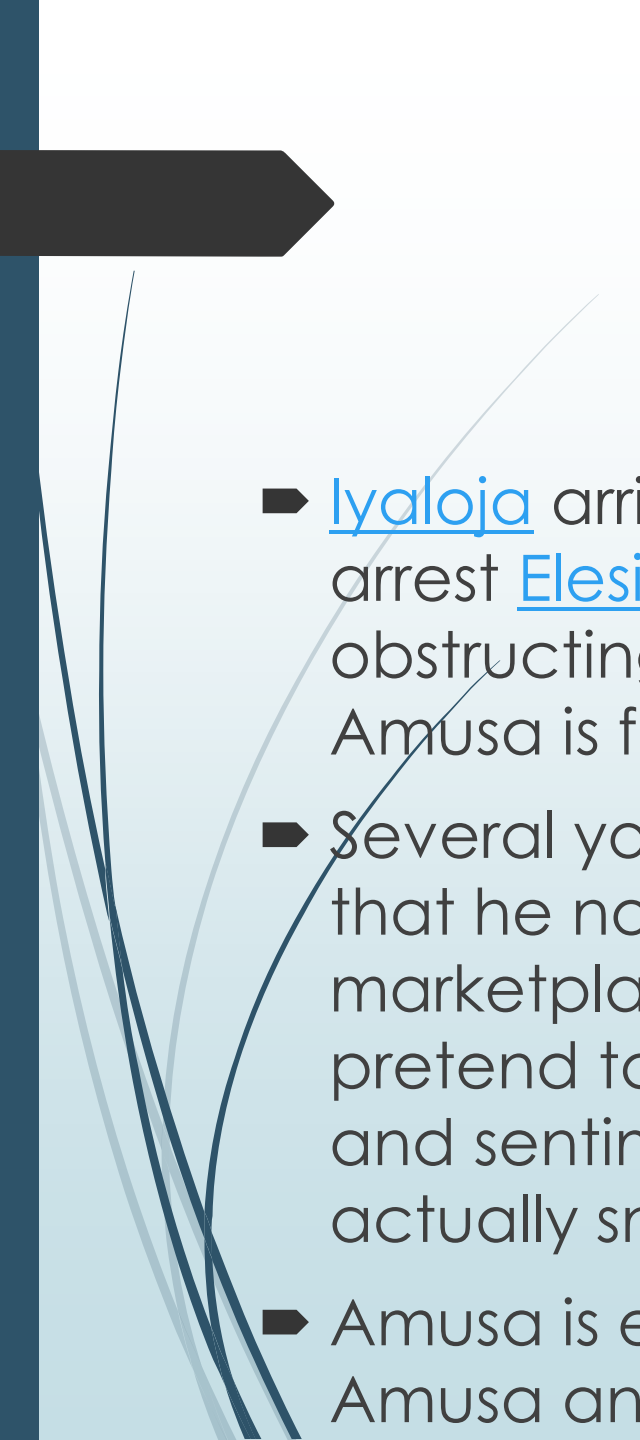
- 
- ▶ Pilkings comments that he often has to clash with that chief, and remembers having an issue before. He was helping the chief's son get into medical school in England, which the chief fought passionately. He ended up having to help the boy escape without his father's knowledge.
 - ▶ Jane and Joseph tell Pilkings that there is perhaps more going on – if Elesin dies before he can join the King, [Olunde](#), the son, would have to take his place. Pilkings says it is no wonder the son left, but concedes he does not know if Olunde knew that.


- 
- ▶ Jane responds that the natives are very private, but Pilkings snaps that they are always willing to blurt out their secrets. Jane muses, “do they really give anything away? I mean, anything that really counts” (29). Pilkings mutters, “sly, devious bastards” (29) and Joseph asks if he can go. Pilkings says he can, and he forgot he was there.
 - ▶ Pilkings and Jane argue about using swear words. It grows quiet but the drumming is heard. Joseph comes back and his master asks him about the sound. Joseph says he is confused because it sounds like the death *and* the marriage of a great chief. Pilkings offends him by making a joke about holy water, and Jane rebukes him after the boy leaves, saying the new African converts take religion very seriously.


- 
- Pilkings scoffs that she is ridiculous. The conversation turns back to the chief. Jane says he must stop it, but he blusters that he does not care about their barbaric customs and he would be embarrassed if it really was a wedding and he broke it up.
 - Finally, he calls Joseph back, who takes a while to return, claiming he did not hear. Pilkings orders Joseph to take Amusa a note. He grudgingly apologizes about the holy water comment.
 - Joseph leaves, and Pilkings tells his wife to get her costume ready because they are going to the ball. He adds that his note said to arrest Elesin. As they prepare to leave Pilkings shares that the Prince is touring the colonies and will be at the ball later.
 - Jane replies that she now knows why he was so edgy earlier. Pilkings tells her to shut up and come along. She jokes back and they depart.

Summary of Act III

- ▶ The front of a stall in the marketplace is covered with rich cloths. The women are agitated. [Amusa](#) and his two constables have their batons out and try to use them to push past the women, who hold firm. The women begin to tease Amusa, calling him a eunuch and telling him to go back to the white man who sent him
- ▶ Amusa protests that he will come back with weapons, and tries to talk over their jeers. The women say their husband and father will prove himself stronger than the white man's government tonight.

- 
- ▶ [Iyaloja](#) arrives and Amusa appeals to her. He says he is going to arrest [Elesin](#) for criminal intent, and that the women need to stop obstructing him. Iyaloja replies that this is merely a wedding. Amusa is frustrated with the insults lobbed at him.
 - ▶ Several younger girls break through and start threatening Amusa that he no longer knows his mother or the ways of the marketplace. They knock off the men's hats, and then begin to pretend to be Englishmen, mimicking their accents, affectations, and sentiments. At the end, one calls out "Sergeant!" and Amusa actually snaps to attention. The girls collapse in hysterics.
 - ▶ Amusa is enraged and Iyaloja gently cautions the girls. Finally, Amusa and his men leave, promising to come back.

- 
- ▶ The women and girls begin dancing and singing. Elesin, wearing only a white wrapper, emerges, holding a white folded velvet cloth. He hands it slowly to Iyaloja and says it represents the “union of life and seeds of passage” (40). He listens and says it is nearly time to go.
 - ▶ [The Bride](#) also emerges, Elesin says their consummation is not quite done, and she must stay by him until he passes on. He then praises the marketplace.
 - ▶ He listens again, and hears that the King’s dog and the King’s horse are being killed before him. His eyes cloud and he smiles faintly. He says his spirit is eager and he is ready. He seems in a state of semi-hypnosis. He asks the mothers to let him dance into his next passage. His own dance now becomes solemn and slow.





The praise-singer joins him and asks if Elesin can hear his voice. Elesin replies, faintly, that he can. The praise-singer continues to speak to Elesin to make him ready. Elesin says, “I have freed myself of earth and now it’s getting dark. Strange voices guide my feet” (43). He appears in a deeper trance.


- ▶ Iyaloja speaks of death and its different types –Elesin “dies the unknowable death of death...” (43). The praise-singer tells Elesin he cannot sense his body anymore and that he has gone ahead of the world.
- ▶ Elesin is far into his trance. The praise-singer continues to speak to him of the sounds he might hear and the sight of light at the end of the passage. He asks if he sees the “dark groom and master of life” (45).
- ▶ The praise-singer is overcome with emotion. Elesin dances on, heavily.


Summary of Act IV


- At the ball, everyone waits for the Prince, who finally enters with a companion. [The Resident](#) and his partner enter behind. A Viennese waltz is called for. Everyone hopes to be noticed, even though they are wearing costumes. [Pilkings](#) and Jane get their turn, and are admired.
- A footman brings a note to the Resident, who grabs Pilkings and takes him aside. He asks about the chief and the market women rioting; he criticizes Pilkings for not knowing about all this in advance.
- The native police officers approach, and the Resident is confused, as he thought the English gave them some colorful identifying pieces of clothing. Pilkings says their hats came off in the riot. When [Amusa](#) sees Pilkings, he averts his eyes and mumbles about the dead. Exasperated, Pilkings relieves him of his duties for the day. Pilkings prepares to leave.


- 
- ▶ The clock strikes midnight and Pilkings and Jane look at each other in horror; they wonder if the act was completed. Pilkings and the policemen leave in a hurry.
 - ▶ As Jane waits, the figure of [Olunde](#) emerges out of the darkness. He and Jane greet each other, Jane effusive and friendly. Olunde says he came to see her husband. He makes a light quip about her desecrating an ancestral mask, and she is disappointed he cares about that. Olunde says he is not mad, but has learned that the English do not respect the things they do not understand.


- 
- It is uncomfortably quiet for a moment. Jane says she is sorry he did not find his time in England edifying. He corrects her and says he did, and he admires the English for certain things, like their conduct in this war. Jane brings up a captain who sacrificed himself for hundreds of other people. She does not seem very condoning, but Olunde admires the man's self-sacrifice.
 - After a moment, Olunde urges her to tell him where he can find her husband; he must talk to him. Jane alludes to what her husband is doing for him, and for all black people. Olunde says he knows what is going on, that he prepared to come home as soon as he received a cable that the King was dead. He has come home to bury his father.

- 
- ▶ Jane is shocked. Olunde explains that there is no other protection needed for [Elesin](#) besides the honor and veneration of his own people. Jane criticizes him for his feudalistic and barbaric outlook and customs.
 - ▶ Olunde responds by gesturing to the ball, a party during wartime. Jane stiffly says it is for therapy. Olunde calls it decadence but says he admires the white man's ability to survive; by all accounts white men should have warred and wiped themselves out but they know how to survive.

- 
- ▶ They argue over suicide, with Olunde taking the side that this war contains mass suicide. He adds that at least Nigerians do not call something what it is not. Eventually, Jane asks him if he will promise to resume his training and become a doctor. Surprised, Olunde says of course he will.
 - ▶ Suddenly the drums change their tune and Olunde announces that his father is dead. Jane screams that he is callous and savage. The Resident's Aide-de-Camp rushes over, solicitous to Jane and cruel to Olunde. He threatens Olunde, but Jane calms down and tells him everything is alright. [The Aide-de-Camp](#) huffs that as soon as natives put a suit on they think they are high and mighty.


- 
- He leaves. Jane asks Olunde softly if he can explain how he has this acceptance and peace of his father's death. Olunde kindly replies that he started mourning for his father as soon as he heard the King died. He knew it was his duty and he did not want to dishonor his people.
 - Jane is confused, saying to Olunde that his father disowned him. Olunde says he was stubborn and did not mean it. Jane is calmer now and thanks him. At this moment, Pilkings returns. He urgently asks for Bob, the Aide-de-Camp.


- 
- Olunde thanks Pilkings for not interfering. Pilkings looks uncomfortable. He turns to the Aide-de-Camp when he arrives and starts discussing an old storeroom where slaves were kept before they were shipped away.
 - His manner and words are confusing to Jane and Olunde. Olunde wonders if all this fuss can be because his father killed himself. Suddenly they hear Elesin far off, bellowing like an animal and yelling for the white men not to touch him.


- 
- ▶ Jane tries to pull Olunde away. Elesin is brought in. He stops like a statue in front of his son.
 - ▶ Jane cries that they should not hold him like that, and he is released. Elesin collapses before his son.
 - ▶ Olunde says coldly, "I have no father, eater of left-overs" (61). He walks away and Elesin crumples.


Summary of Act V


- ▶ [Elesin](#) is chained up in a prison cell. His bride sits mutely outside the cell. [Pilkings](#) come in and observes the prisoner. He muses that Elesin seems fascinated by the moon. Elesin replies to the "ghostly one" that he is indeed.
- ▶ Pilkings thinks the night is peaceful but Elesin counters that it is not: Pilkings shattered the peace forever and destroyed, not saved, Elesin's life.
- ▶ Pilkings retorts that he was doing his duty, but Elesin sees that they have a very different understanding of duty. Elesin ruminates that he is no longer mad at Pilkings and wonders if this is part of some larger plan.
- ▶ Perhaps Pilkings meant to push the world off course. What is most tragic is how the roles of father and son are reversed. For Elesin, though, he is proud that he truly has a son; he knows [Olunde](#) will avenge his shame.


- 
- Pilkings shrugs and relays Olunde's words that as he cannot judge his father, he cannot despise him. Pilkings also adds that he advised Olunde to return to England. Elesin sighs that this might be best because he lost his father's place of honor.
 - After a moment Pilkings asks Elesin about the contradictions of his own race, as with the send-off Elesin was receiving. Before the chief can answer, running feet are heard.
 - Pilkings leaves to join Jane. Elesin turns to his bride and speaks of blame. He says he blamed the white man, then his gods, and wants to blame her, but he knows that she was more than a desire of the flesh, and that she was "the final gift of the living to their emissary to the land of the ancestors" (65).

- 
- ▶ Jane and Pilkings return, arguing about her possible interference. It seems [lyaloja](#) is here, and Pilkings is reluctant to let her visit. As Pilkings goes to let her in, Elesin comments that his own wife is silent and Jane is too talkative.
 - ▶ Pilkings orders Elesin not to try anything funny, and the chief sighs that there is no point and that his honor is entirely gone.

- 
- Iyaloja begins to speak angrily to the chastened chief, becoming more incensed when she sees the Bride there.
 - Elesin tries to defend himself, saying she saw what happened when the shadow of the stranger fell upon him and how his power was gone when the iron touched his wrists.
 - Iyaloja speaks only of the betrayal, and how he led them on as a leader. She says several times that she came with a burden. She alludes to a reversal of the cycle of their being. Once, she steps beyond the line drawn by Pilkings and is accosted by a guard. Pilkings tells her she better leave.

- 
- Iyaloja speaks abstrusely, which annoys Pilkings. She tells him she is not there to help him understand, and speaks more of burdens and asks him to release the King so he can ride homeward by himself.
 - [The Aide-de-Camp](#) runs in and says a group of women and a few men are coming up the hill. Pilkings is worried and frustrated, especially as he thinks Olunde might be involved.
 - Jane says her husband should trust Olunde. He tells Bob to let them in and have Olunde be ready to leave for England. When he comments that he will shoot if they make trouble, Iyaloja sighs, "to prevent one death you will actually make other deaths? Ah, great is the wisdom of the white race" (73).

- 
- The women come in, carrying a longish object covered in cloth. They set it down. Elesin begs to be let out because he has a duty to fulfill but Pilkings refuses. Elesin says he must speak softly and secretly.
 - The Praise-singer, who is also there, intones words about the journey to come and tells Elesin to whisper to his shadow.
 - The object is revealed as the body of Olunde. Iyaloja says he intervened so honor would not fly away, and the son is now the father. [The Praise-Singer](#) criticizes Elesin for sitting on the side while the evil ones pushed the world off its course.

- 
- Elesin is fixated on his son. Suddenly he strangles himself with the chain before anyone can intervene. Iyaloja rebukes the white men for trying to stop him, commenting that he has finally gone on even though it is so late.
 - Pilkings asks if this is what she wanted and she says no, but he brought it to be. When Pilkings reaches to close Elesin's eyes she yells at him to stop treating him like "pauper's carrion" (76), and the Bride steps in to do it.
 - Iyaloja and the Bride leave. The women sway and the dirge is louder.

