Binary Significations of 'Death' in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*

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Abstract
This paper examines the various ways the main actors refer to 'death' with reference to the essence of Elesin's duties in Wole Soyinka's "Death and the King's Horseman". This examination splits the actors into two opposing camps based on how they name 'death'. One group sees death as necessary and vital to living. To this group, it is even worth celebrating as it keeps the circle of life in order. To the other group, death is the cessation of existence, not a welcome phenomenon. And when it is a deliberate act, it is criminal. These opposite views reflect in how they identify death in words. This essay contends that the conflict in *Death and the King's Horseman* stems from these two opposite views reflected in how they signify death. The structuralist concepts of Binary Oppositions and Signifier were used in the examination of how death is named in the text.

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In explaining the relationship between writers and their literal and literary worlds, Ngugi wa Thiong'o says "A writer and a surgeon have something in common— a passion for the truth.... Writers are the surgeons of the heart and souls of a community" (ix). Inherent in wa Thiongo's words is the importance of precision. For, like a surgeon, a writer must be precise. This quality manifests in the use of the word 'death' and its interpretation by the peoples mirrored in Wole Soyinka's "Death and the King's Horseman" (*Horseman*). It is how these people identify, interpret and, therefore, signify (name) 'death' as a phenomenon in *Horseman* that this essay explores.

When a king dies, his horseman must accompany him to continue his duties in the hereafter. So when the King in *Horseman* dies, his Elesin prepares to perform his duties. However, the District Officer, Pilkings, who sees Elesin's act as suicide, does everything to stop it, resulting in the inevitable conflict. So in looking at how the various actors in this conflict identify 'death', this essay puts the conflict in perspective.

Obviously, the structuralist theoretical concepts of Binary Opposition and Signifier guide this analysis. Structuralism has its roots in the seminal works of the Swiss linguist, Ferdinard de Saussure (1857-1913), who developed a modern (and descriptive) approach to language study. In his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), de Saussure drew attention to the synchronic study of language/texts.

de Saussure divided language into *parole*, the utterance and *langue*, the underlying structure (of rules) that controls the parole. He argued that the langue, which is internalised by accident or design, is more important. Further explaining these rules, he said words have no inherent relationship to what they refer in the real world, saying that a word is just a signifier (sound-image) that makes sense in the signified (referent) based on "...whatever the community using it says it is" (Tyson 213-214).

These principles formed the foundation for structuralism as a theory in literature, where it is used for classification of literary genres, description of narrative operations and analysis of literary interpretation (Tyson, 221). S. A. Ogunpitan simplifies Structuralism thus: "The idea of structure conjures up a model or an entity, whole and complete, which has recognisable shape or form and is made up of constituting parts or elements... constituting parts themselves are best considered in relation to one another.... The relationship is, therefore, one of interdependence" (373).

However, "structure" here does not mean a fixed system or pattern. Ogunpitan's explanation is of an established structure. So when the focus, and therefore the variables, change, another structure can be realised in the same work of art. Ogunpitan further simplifies his explanation by quoting the flexibility of structuralism in Roman Jakobson:

> Structure...is phenomenological and not an empirical reality; it is not the work itself, but a set of functional relationships which are located in the consciousness of a collective (generation, milieu, etc). Several distinct structures with hierarchies among other parts can gradually be realised, in different times, or, as the case may be, milieux, on the basis of the work of art. Thus, the nature of structure is not unequivocally given by the work of art. The structure becomes explicit, however, once we perceive the work against the background of a vital tradition from which this work diverges and which it reflects. If the background of the tradition shifts, the structure changes too—he dominant is altered, etc. Owing to such a change, the work assumes a completely new appearance (374-375).

The lengthy but necessary explanation from Jakobson (qtd. in Ogunpitan) is echoed by Anyadike when he says "...there is no meaning out there, which you simply reflect with language; you create meaning by the way you position the words to relate to each other.... The structuralist critic, therefore, is only interested in demonstrating how every literary text is a construction made up of shared system of signification" (314). At this juncture it must be stated that although arbitrary, structuralist approach to literary analyses does not create meaning out of a vacuum or 'lie'. It means 'drawing' a pattern with available/existing pointers. Roland Bathes puts it succinctly when he says "structuralist activity", among other things, "find[s] mobile fragments" (490).

As mentioned earlier, two of the concepts of structuralism, Binary Opposition and Signifier, are germane to this essay. The latter refers to the identification of the system (signified). It is what Tyson calls "Wholeness … a unit" whose "...parts work together to create something new". The former, she explains, means understanding of ideas by their oppositeness to other ideas (211). So *up*, for instance, is better understood in relation to *down*.

From the foregoing, "Binary Significations of 'Death' in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman",* means two things. First, significations of death have been identified. Second, they exist in two opposite forms. Therefore, these significations and how they are realised are Bathes' "mobile fragments" put together to form a structure— 'Binary Significations of Death'. This clause is now the signifier of the structure by which this essay

interrogates *Horseman*. In fact, as shall be seen, if not already obvious, it is the two-pronged but entirely opposite significations that is at the core of the conflict in *Horseman*.

But first, it must be said that a large body of works exists on *Horseman* and a larger one on the writer. However, none has said anything about how naming 'death' is what separates the conflicting characters into two groups. One of such is T. Gnanasekaran's "Western Cultural Beliefs in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*". It is a juxtaposition of the two cultures that clash. He concludes that "The mistake of the white race has been to think that their...way of life is the universally correct one..."(818).

In "A Pragmatic Analysis of Nigerianisms in the Usage of English in *Death and the King's Horseman*", Moses Adebayo Aremu examines 40 utterances from *Horseman* based on reference, metaphor, shared situation knowledge, shared cultural knowledge, proverbs, pidgin, lexical borrowing and other pragmatic parameters (100). Although the two papers examine the relevance of cultural realities to the issues in *Horseman*, they do not realise how the people name 'death'.

Equally, Taiwo Oladimeji's "Heroism in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*", examines death only as it defines Elesin's (un)heroic acts and Olunde's redemptive death. But a major gap in Oladimeji's paper must be mentioned. He portrays Elesin as one that shirks duty, whereas his inability to "follow" the King is due in large part to interruption by political authorities. But it is Farinde Raifu Olarewaju's "A Semiotic Analysis of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*" that treats 'death' as a signifier capable of different referents. He starts by quoting Abiola Irele, who says "In Soyinka, there is a personal appropriation of and reinterpretation in new terms of Yoruba cosmology so that it exists in his work as an authentic mode of vision"(51).

It is this Soyinka's reinterpretation in new terms that enables Olarewaju to state that 'death' "Ordinarily and denotatively... means the demise of a human being... But in the play it is used connotative signified to mean the continuity of a race. It is like the rebirth of a generation"(54). However, although Olarewaju's explanation does a lot for the understanding of this essay, his semiotic analysis takes from the people's understanding of Elesin's duties if seen in only "connotative signified" terms. For when the people refer to Elesin's need to 'die', it is, in denotative sense, a transition vital to their existence.

Therefore, to examine how signifying 'death' split the people of Elesin's community into two, this paper recognises two camps. The first camp is A. The people that signify 'death' in similar words in this camp are Elesin Oba, Praise Singer and Iyaloja. In the opposite second camp (B) are Jane, her husband Joseph Pilkings, and the Resident. Now we will look at how camp A signifies death.

The first time ELESIN says something about his looming death is in these words: "A tryst where the cockerel needs no adornment" (9). A "tryst", a secret meeting between lovers, is not scary. It is what is looked forward to with anticipation. This mood is held in the next words: "When the horse sniffs the stable does he not strain at the bridle?" (9). Then he makes direct references to the living and the dead: "...on this side"; "… my honour are legacies to the living; stay behind and let the world sip its honey…; "This night I'll lay my head upon their lap and go to sleep" and "…as I go to meet my great forebears" (10).

The first time he uses the word— "Death came calling" (11) — was while narrating the "Not-I" story of how "Death" scared people except him. Significantly, the personification of "Death" in the story makes it a living thing, in fact, a male: "I unrolled my welcome mat for him to see" (14). Yet, it is still not a phenomenon to be scared of: "Watch me dance along the narrowing path"; "I shall not turn aside" and "I go to keep my friend and master company" (14).

The next set of words by Elesin describes "death" as not just a journey, but one that ensures continuity of life: "Life is honour.... It ends when honour ends" (15); "Endless cord that links us all to the great origin"; "…am I still earthed in the beloved market of my youth? Or could it be my will has outleapt the conscious act and I have come among the great departed?" (18); "That which makes my going the sheerest dream of an afternoon. Should voyagers not travel light? Let the considerate traveller shed, of his excessive load, all that may benefit the living" (20);

"Let my going be likened to the twilight hour of the plantain" (20); "The opening of the last door of passage, dare to rid my going of regrets!"; "I am girded for the route beyond"; "Then let me travel light; "Let it take root in the earth of my choice, in this earth I leave behind"; "Shall I step burdened into the unknown?"(21); "Let the fingers of my bride seal my eyelids with earth and wash my body" (23); "It is no mere virgin stain, but the union of life and the seeds of passage" (40).

Then when the drums begin the rhythms of passage: "The king's dog has been killed" and then "The king's favourite horse is about to follow his master". But for him, a human, he is neither being killed nor dying, but doing "...my leave-taking...". And when the journey begins, "His eyes appear to cloud. He passes his hand over them…" (40). Then he continues with preparation: "But wait a while my spirit. Wait. Wait for the coming of the courier of the king". "If they arrive before the drums beat for me, I shall tell him to let the Alafin know I follow swiftly." "If they come after the drums have sounded, why then, all is well for I have gone ahead." "Our spirits shall fall in step along the great passage."(41).

Then the description of Elesin's progressive state of losing consciousness: "He seems again to be falling into a state of semi-hypnosis; his eyes scan the sky but it is a kind of daze" (41).

Elesin goes on: "My faithful friends let our feet touch together this last time, lead me into the other market with sounds that cover my skin with down yet make my limbs strike earth like a thoroughbred"; "Dear mothers, let me dance into the passage even as I have lived beneath your roofs"; (His dance is one solemn, regal motions, each gesture of the body is made with a solemn finality) (41). "Elesin's message will be read only when his loyal heart no longer beats;" "Elesin Alaafin trusts no beasts with messages between a King and his companion"(42) and "(his voice is drowsy) I have freed myself of earth and now it's getting dark. Strange voices guide my feet" (43).

Elesin's impending "death" is, as he sees and signifies it, a journey into another form of functional living — an extension of the current living where he keeps his friend and king company (14). He looked forward to it as a duty and the essence of his life. The interruption of this journey, for him, is not just a crime, but a desecration that is, in fact, the actual death and/or

killing. He tells Pilkings: “Is it not enough that you have covered me in shame!” (60); “You did not save my life District Officer. You destroyed it” (62).

Every other reference to his interrupted passing was filled with regret: “… it touched that moment for which my whole life has been spent in blessings”; “I heard them and I shed all thoughts of earth. I began to follow the moon to the abode of gods…”; “...that was when you entered my chosen place of departure on feet of desecration” (62); “… this plan to push our world from its course and sever the cord that links us to the great origin?”(63); “For I confess to you, daughter, my weakness came violently into *my fading presence*, there was also a weight of longing on my earth-held limbs. I would have shaken it off, already *my foot had begun to lift* but then, the white ghost entered and all was defiled” (65), and “… I made to summon the powers that would lead me over the last measure of earth into the land of fleshless” (68).

Another Camp A member is the PRAISE SINGER. This is how he signifies ‘death’: “… the man approaches a brand-new bride he forgets the long faithful mother of his children”, referring to another Praise Singer taking his place when the Elesin crosses to the other side. His jealous streak continues: “Are you sure there will be one like me on the other side?”(9); “Far be it for me to belittle the dwellers of that place…”; “...I don’t know for certain that you’ll meet my father” (10); “He who must, must voyage forth” (17).

An important occurrence at this point is the progressive descent of Elesin into “the passage” (not 'death' for Camp A), with the Praise Singer's chants complementing the drums in helping Elesin on his way: “ELESIN’S trance appears to be deepening, his steps heavier”; ELESIN in his motions appear to feel for a direction of sound, subtly, but he only sinks deeper into his trance-dance”; “ELESIN is now sunk fully deep in his trance, there is no longer sign of any awareness of his surroundings”(44), and “He appears to break down. ELESIN dances on, completely in a trance” (45). From this progress, Elesin would have simply “disappeared” into unconsciousness. But Pilkings intervenes.

Meanwhile, the Praise Singer continues with the Camp A signification of 'death': “...so he races on before the horse to heaven”; “Are the drums on the other side now tuning skin to skin with ours in Osugbo?”; “Are there sounds there I cannot hear, do footsteps surround you which pound the earth like gbedu, roll like thunder round the dome of the world?” “Is there darkness gathering in your head Elesin? Is there now a streak of light at the end of the passage, a light I dare not look upon?”; “Elesin Alafin, don’t think I do not know why your lips are heavy, why your limbs are drowsy as palm oil in the cold of harmattan” (44).

The Praise Singer's signification also hints at 'normal' living on the other side: “Your eyelids are glazed like a courtesan’s, is it that you see the dark groom and master of life?”; “And will you see my father? Will you tell him that I stayed with you to the last?”; “… will you remember Olohun-Iyo even if the music on the other side surpasses his mortal craft?” “If any there cuts your yam with a small knife, or pours you wine in a small calabash…” (45).

Then there is the IYALOJA. Her signifiers for 'death' are incisive, pragmatic and almost scientific: “The voyager sets forth”(16); “Still among the living” (20) sound like she does not belong in this camp. But hear her: “Still, even those who leave town to make a new dwelling elsewhere like to be remembered by what they leave behind”; “The voice (of Elesin) I hear is already touched by the waiting fingers of our departed”; “…that will sour his wish and lay regrets on the last moments of his mind”; “Only the curses of the departed are to be feared”;

“The claims of one whose foot is on the threshold of their abode surpasses even the claims of blood”(21).

It is at this juncture that the entire purpose of Elesin's existence is put into perspective by Iyaloja. She says: “Let grain that will not feed the voyager at his passage drop here and take root as he steps beyond this earth and us”; “… you who now bestride the hidden gulf and pause to draw the right foot across and into the rest home of the great forebears”; “Elesin, even at the narrow end of the passage I know you will look back…”; “It is those who stand at the gateway of change to whose cry we must pay heed”; “It will be neither of this world nor of the next. Nor of the one behind us”; “When the moment comes, don’t turn the food to rodents’ droppings in their mouth”(22) and “You wish to travel light”(23).

Although our objective is how Iyaloja names 'death', the way she symbolically marries the purpose of Elesin's passage with his duties as a new groom also enforces the life-giving nature of Elesin's royal duties to the King: “Now we must go prepare your bridal chamber. Then these same hands will lay your shrouds” (23); “What gives you the right to obstruct our leader of men in the performance of his duty” (36); “… if anyone had come to disturb him (Pilkings) on his wedding night” (36); “It takes an Elesin to die the death of death… Only Elesin … dies the unknowable death of death…”; “Gracefully, gracefully does the horseman regain the stable at the end of day, gracefully… (43)”.

And in her anger and bitterness, when Elesin's duties are truncated: “You made so bold with the servant of the white king who took your side against death” (67). Her next signifier explains the peculiarity of this 'death': “Who are you to open a new life when you dared not open the door to a new existence?”(67); and when Olunde took his father, the Elesin's place: “Because he could not bear to let honour fly out of doors, he stopped it with his life” (75); “He is gone at last into the passage but oh, how late it all is”(76), when Elesin commits suicide with the handcuffs on him.

Iyaloja then delivers the climatic and cathartic statement that summarises the essence of Elesin's duties of the fourth stage, when she tells the widowed bride: “Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn” (76). This is the circle of life sustained by the duties of Elesin.

In Camp B are those who see 'death' as the end of existence, which needs to be avoided. Therefore, their idea is that suicide is a crime that must be prevented and, when attempted, must incur punishment. In this camp are Pilkings, the District Officer, and his wife, Jane.

First, JANE: “Your costume darling. Our fancy dress” (24). Jane is referring to the sacred masquerade regalia they were wearing to a ball, while explaining Amusa, the police officer’s shock to her husband, Pilkings. The significance is that when Elesin passes on, he would join the ancestors which the “costume” represents for the people. So trivialising it is significant in seeing Elesin's destiny as unnecessary and even criminal. Then she describes Amusa's reactions as that of a “… big pagan heart, bless him (24).

This is why to her Elesin's purpose on earth is “...ritual murder” (26); “...a horrible custom”; “This affair for instance, we didn’t know they still practised that custom did we?” (29); “Is that drumming connected with dying or anything of that nature?” (30). Then, to Olunde, “The business of your father....” (52); “The king dies and a chieftain must be buried with him”; “ritual suicide” (53).

And Olunde's reaction to what his father wanted to do shocks her: “How can you be so callous! So unfeeling!” (55); “Your calm acceptance for instance, can you explain that? It was so unnatural. I don’t understand that at all” (56).

Pilkings' first reference to Elesin's need to “pass on” is: “Come on Amusa, you don’t believe in all this nonsense do you?”(24), in response to Amusa's shock. “… he doesn’t believe in any mumbo-jumbo (because Amusa is a Muslim); “… I have bet on it we’re taking first prize at the ball”(24) with the ancestors' clothing, and to him Amusa's reaction is a “… little joke [that] has gone far enough” (25).

Then the “death” itself: “Obviously he means murder” (26); “If it were ritual murder or something like that I’d be duty-bound to do something”; “I can’t keep an eye on all the potential suicide in this province”(31); “It seems because the King is dead some important chief has to commit suicide” (46). And displaying a total lack of understanding of what Elesin's life is all about: “… the elder grimly approaches heaven and you ask him to bear your greetings yonder; do you really think he makes the journey willingly?”(64); “… chiefs commit suicide to keep him company” (71).

The RESIDENT is busy, but has time enough to ask: “The king? Isn’t it the same one who died nearly a month ago?” (46).

It can be seen that how Camp A and Camp B signify Elesin's 'death' exists in appositeness. While the first camp names (signifies) it with words that describe it as a passage, a transition and a simple change of location/existence, which is vital to living for the people, the second sees it as a termination of life and existence, which no man has the right to do. This view reflects in the choice of words by which they name 'death'. So since one (Camp B) is in a position of authority and, therefore, is duty-bound to prevent 'death', a conflict is inevitable.

However, there is a third camp. Its existence is the result of, and a streamlining of, the conflict between Camps A and B. So it is not a camp of itself but a creation, and an explanation, of the two camps. In this group is Amusa, the officer; Joseph, the Pilkings' cook/househelp, and Olunde. They easily, at times painfully, signify 'death' in the “language” of both camps.

Amusa says: “It belong to dead cult, not for human being” (24), when he arrives to brief the DO only to meet the couple in the masquerade attire. Explaining why he refuses to go on with the briefing on Elesin's matter, Amusa says: “Sir, it is a matter of death. How can man talk against death to person in uniform of death? (25). When Pilkings accuses him of double standards since he “arrested” the masquerades they stripped, Amusa says: “… I arrest ring-leader but I treat *egungun* with respect”.

“Now!” Pilkings barks for him to say why he is there, but 'AMUSA switches his gaze to the ceiling suddenly, remains mute' (25), and never waivers. He drops a message instead: “… the Elesin Oba is to commit death tonight as a result of native custom”(26), after the “costumed” Pilkings leave for the ball.

However, in Amusa's encounter with the women, this is how he signifies 'death': “Is ignorant and criminal to prove dat kin’ prove”; “I am here to arrest Elesin for criminal intent” (36). Significantly, while avoiding words such as 'death' and 'suicide', he reflects Camp B's criminalisation of Elesin's essence.

But it is Joseph that attempts a crystallisation of what Elesin is meant to do: “No sir, it has no power”, his Christian beliefs speaking about the 'costume'. On Elesin, he says “You

mean that Chief who is going to kill himself?". But attempts an explanation: "No master. He will not kill anybody and no one will kill him. He will simply die" (trying to capture Elesin's progressive descent into the passage reference earlier from pages 44/45); "... the Elesin must die so as to accompany him (King) to heaven" (27). He also explains the drumming that has rankled Pilkings: "It sounds like the death of a great chief and then it sounds like the wedding of a great chief" (30). Joseph's predicament evokes admiration and pity at same time. He signifies 'death' like Camp B, but attempts to explain it like Camp A. At the same time he takes offence when Pilkings maligns his religion.

Olunde it is that put both camps side-by-side by incisive and clinical significations of 'death' and then drawing parallels. When he meets Jane in 'costume', prepping for a morale-boosting ball and the visit of the Prince, Olunde says: "And that is the good cause for which you desecrate an ancestral mask?"; "I discovered that you have no respect for what you do not understand" (50). He is trying to let Jane see what using masquerade's attire means to his people.

Then on the story of a captain that stayed behind to blow up an infected ship, he says of the fuse the captain has to light: "It must have been a very short fuse". But certainly a lengthy line can be attached to a fuse; long enough to be lit from a distance, to ensure that the captain stays alive. But "That captain's self-sacrifice" is because something can go wrong and "That was a risk the captain couldn't take" (51). Olunde's explanation of the captain's sacrifice narrated by Jane is him creating a sub-plot that reflects his father's duty to the people, which Camp B refuses to admit

The following significations illustrate that Olunde is trying to let Jane and then Pilkings see that his father's 'death' is part of living: "… I don't want him (Pilkings) to incur the enmity of our people. Especially over nothing"; "Mrs Pilkings, I came home to bury my father" (52). "No one can undertake what he does tonight without the deepest protection the mind can conceive"; "But at least have the humility to let others survive in their own way"(referencing the captain's sacrifice and the Prince risking his life on a morale-boosting tour) (53)."

He goes further in a matter-of-fact way: "Yes Mrs. Pilkings, my father is dead" (55); "...my father has been dead in my mind for nearly a month"; "Ever since I learnt of the king's death"; "I've lived with my bereavement so long now that I cannot think of him alive"; "I didn't want to do anything wrong, something which might jeopardise the welfare of my people"; Even if I had died before him I would still be buried like his eldest son" (57).

And when he is unaware that Pilkings has arrested his father, he says: "I can only tell you it would have been a terrible calamity if you'd succeeded" (57); "But you must know by now there are things you cannot understand – or help" (58); "All this can't be just because he failed to stop my father killing himself"(59). Then when his father falls at his feet in handcuffs, Olunde proves to everyone that he is a true native, well brought up by his father: "I have no father, eater of left-overs" (61).

In conclusion, without binary significations of 'death' in *Horseman*, there would be no conflict. And without conflict, there would be no phenomenon to appreciate, study or analyse. Therefore, de Saussure's *parole* is the conflict. But the *langue*— the system/structure that determines the conflict— is the very opposite ways the conflicting characters signify 'death'. On one side are those who see Elesin Oba's agenda as a vehicle or means of transition. So they

describe it with words, symbolism and parables that glorify it. Meaning it is a welcome, and even celebrated, phenomenon. Directly opposite are those that see what Elesin Oba wants to do as incalculable destruction of life evidenced in taking of a life, which is a crime. This conviction manifests in how they describe 'death', setting them on a collision course with the first group.

An area deserving of further study is the socio-cultural, political and, tangentially, religious background that determine the oppositeness of signification of 'death' in *Horseman*. This approach, if examined with structuralist concept(s) will mean, according to Jakobson, "... the background of the tradition shifts, the structure changes too...". The signifier now becomes a manifestation of a structure built on social, political and religious (Bathes) "mobile fragments". These then make "the work assume a completely new appearance."

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