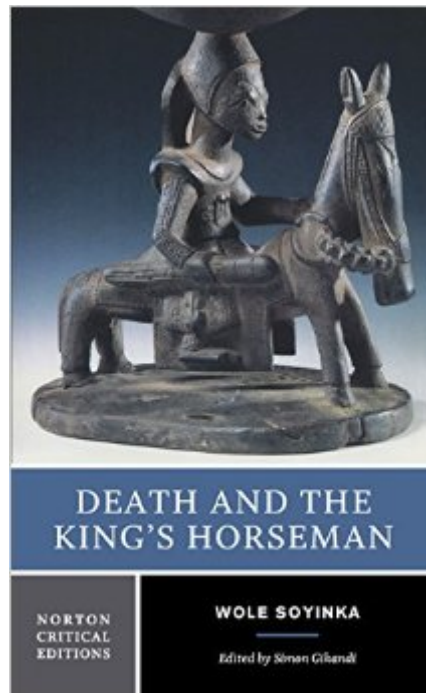


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# Death And The King's Horseman: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds And Contexts, Criticism, Norton



## Synopsis

This Norton Critical Edition of *Death and the King's Horseman* is the only student edition available in the United States. Based on events that took place in 1946 in the ancient Yoruban city of Oyo, Soyinka's acclaimed and powerful play addresses classic issues of cultural conflict, tragic decision-making, and the psychological mindsets of individuals and groups. The text of the play is accompanied by an introduction and explanatory annotations for the many allusions to traditional Nigerian myth and culture. "Backgrounds and Sources" helps readers understand *Death and the King's Horseman's* traditional African contexts and the role of theater in African culture. Included are a map of Yoruba-land, discussions of Yoruban religious beliefs and cultural traditions, Soyinka on the various forms that theater has taken in African culture in order to survive, and Anthony Appiah on Soyinka's struggle with the problem of African identity in the creation of *Death and the King's Horseman*. Commentary on the play as both a theatrical production and a classroom text is provided by Gerald Moore, Tanure Ojaide, and Martin Rohmer. "Criticism" collects nine major essays on the play and the difficulties it presents to readers. Contributors include D. S. Izevbaye, Eldred Durosimi Jones, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Biodun Jeyifo, Wole Soyinka, Joan Hepburn, Adebayo Williams, David Richards, and Olakunle George. A Chronology and Selected Bibliography are also included.

## Book Information

Paperback: 228 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; 1st edition (November 5, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393977617

ISBN-13: 978-0393977615

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.6 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 8.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (25 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #38,102 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #5 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > African](#) #48 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > British & Irish > Dramas & Plays](#) #62 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > Dramas & Plays > Regional & Cultural > European](#)

## 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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