

NAME: AYODELE BELOVED

MATRIC NO: BU23ENG1007

DEPARTMENT: ENGLISH

COURSE: LIT 206

PLAY NAME: THE SONG OF A GOAT

LECTURER'S NAME: Dr ADEGBOYEGA AMOS

TITLE:

THE SONG OF A GOAT by John Pepper Clark

Early Life of John Pepper Clark

John Pepper Clark (born April 6, 1935, Kiagbodo, Delta State Nigeria—died October 13, 2020) was the most lyrical of the Nigerian poets, whose poetry celebrates the physical landscape of Africa. He was a literary critic renowned for his lyrical mastery and exploration of African cultural identity. Clark was instrumental in shaping postcolonial African literature. He studied English at the University of Ibadan, where he founded *The Horn*, a student poetry magazine. Clark's literary career was multifaceted ranging from journalism to academia and he held a teaching position at the University of Lagos. He was also a journalist, playwright, and scholar-critic who conducted research into traditional Ijo myths and legends and wrote essays on African poetry.

After graduating with a degree in English in 1960, he began his career as writer and journalist by working as a Nigerian government information officer and then as the features and editorial writer for the *Daily Express* in Lagos (1960–62). A year's study at Princeton University on a foundation grant resulted in his *America, Their America* (1964), in which he attacks American middle-class values, from capitalism to Black American lifestyles. After a year's research at Ibadan's Institute of African Studies, he became a lecturer in English at the University of Lagos and coeditor of the literary journal *Black Orpheus*.

Clark's verse collections *Poems* (1962) and *A Reed in the Tide* (1965) do not display the degree of craftsmanship apparent in the work of his fellow Nigerian Christopher Okigbo, but in his best poems his sensual imagination makes successful use of the patterns of traditional African life. His *Casualties: Poems 1966–68* (1970) is concerned primarily with the Nigerian civil war. Other poetry collections included *A Decade of Tongues* (1981), *State of the Union* (1985, as J.P. Clark Bekederemo), and *Mandela and Other Poems* (1988).

Of his plays, the first three (published together under the title *Three Plays* in 1964) are tragedies in which individuals are unable to escape the doom brought about by an inexorable law of nature or society. ***Song of a Goat*** (performed 1961), a family tragedy, was well received throughout Africa and Europe for its dramatic skill and the poetic quality of its language. *The Masquerade* (performed 1965) again portrays a family tragedy, but it is *The Raft* (performed 1978) that is considered to be his finest piece of dramatic writing. The situation of four men helplessly adrift on a raft in the Niger River suggests both the human predicament and the dilemma of Nigeria in the modern world. Clark's characterization is convincing and his symbolic setting richly allusive.

A more experimental work, *Ozidi* (performed in the early 1960s; pub. 1966), is a stage version of a traditional Ijo ritual play, which in a native village would take seven days to perform. Like Yoruba folk opera, it is alive with music, dancing, mime, and spectacle. Clark also produced a film (with Francis Speed; *The Ozidi of Atazi* [1972]) and an English translation of this Ijo epic.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Song of a Goat is a tragic drama set in a traditional Nigerian coastal community. Zifa, the protagonist, is burdened by impotence and marital strife. He and his wife Ebiere are desperate for a second child, as fertility symbolizes honor and continuity in their society. Masseur, a local oracle and healer, confirms Ebiere's fertility and suggests, shockingly, that she should sleep with Zifa's brother, Tonye. This culturally sanctioned surrogate act is rejected initially but later carried out in secret, without the necessary ritual, after Zifa continues to refuse the solution.

PLAY SUMMARY

In the first movement of the play, Zifa sends his wife, Ebiere, to see Masseur, the town doctor and alternate oracle. Zifa and Ebiere have one son, Dode, but have failed to conceive during the years since his birth. They're desperate to have another child, as procreation is a sign of well-being in their community. While they both know that Zifa is at fault, Zifa's pride prevents him from admitting this. After examining Ebiere, Masseur assures her she is fertile, and their dialogue, like that throughout the play, relies heavily on metaphor and symbolic allusions. When Ebiere says, "I keep my house Open [...] But my lord will not come in," Masseur deduces that Zifa is impotent. He suggests that the best solution would be a ritually sanctioned sexual encounter between Ebiere and Zifa's brother, Tonye. This shocks Ebiere, who refuses the idea and leaves. Zifa arrives after Ebiere exits, and Masseur confronts him about his impotence. Admitting it's true, Zifa holds out hope that eventually, he and Ebiere will conceive again. But Zifa's affliction is divine punishment for polluting the land by burying his father, who died of the "white taint" (leprosy), sooner than tradition permits. Masseur advises Zifa to accept the traditionally ratified remedy for his problem: assign his conjugal duties to his younger brother following the appropriate ceremonial rites for the transaction. This is too much for Zifa, who considers Masseur's prescription an affront to his manliness. He says death would be a better solution.

The second movement opens with Zifa's aunt, Orukorere, crying out that a leopard has caught a goat, which she hears bleating. Zifa's neighbors have gathered, and, functioning like the chorus in a Greek drama, note that they don't hear anything. Similar to Cassandra in Aeschylus' tragedies, Orukorere has the gift of prophecy, but nobody believes her. Her powers are a curse precipitated by arrogance, for, beautiful when young, she spurned all suitors, and this angered the water deities. Orukorere now envisions the leopard as a threat to her family and declares she must find it. The neighbors begin to worry, but Zifa argues that his aunt is just drunk, as is often true. Falling into a trance, Orukorere begins to tremble; when she recovers, she reports that the leopard got away, or maybe it was a snake, instead.

Ebiere is bathing Dode at the start of the third movement. She is frustrated sexually and otherwise by the situation with Zifa, and this manifests as impatience with her son. Annoyed by his frolicking, she smacks him on the head. Tonye witnesses this and scolds Ebiere, to which she responds with a hiss. He compares her to a snake, provoking Ebiere to reveal her misery and finally her husband's inadequacy. Following Tonye's exhortations to be content with her husband and one child, Ebiere's sexual desires overcome her, and she seduces Tonye. Dode, confused by the coupling happening before him, alerts Orukorere. She leaves them alone, understanding that the family is doomed, and lamenting, "I said there was a serpent in the house but nobody, as usual, will take me seriously."

In the fourth and final movement, Zifa begins to doubt his wife's fidelity when he finds Tonye in his bed, and Ebiere speaks admiringly of him, having heretofore disparaged Tonye. When Zifa questions Orukofere, she confirms his suspicions and urges restraint, saying that unlike bleating goats, men should endure suffering with silence. Because Tonye performed in Zifa's place without the ritual transfer of sexual rights, he and Ebiere have desecrated the house. Zifa plans the sacrifice of a goat to cleanse his house of corruption, while Ebiere and Tonye, unaware they've been discovered, consider a future together. Meanwhile, Orukore expresses grave misgivings about the cleansing rite, afraid the spilling of goat's blood will end in tragedy. Heedless of his aunt's warnings, Zifa kills the goat. He cuts off the head, demanding that Tonye push it, horns and all, into a small pot an act analogous to sexual intercourse. The pot breaks and Ebiere faints. Zifa's fury over his wife's violation boils over, and he chases his brother into the house, where Tonye commits suicide before Zifa can kill him. Zifa then ends his own life by walking into the sea, and Ebiere dies giving birth prematurely.

THEMES

1. **Fertility and Inadequacy:**

The central theme revolves around childbearing as a societal expectation. Zifa's impotence is not just a personal affliction but a communal disgrace, sparking the tragic events of the play.

2. **Tradition vs. Modern Emotion:**

The play contrasts traditional solutions (such as ritual sexual substitution) with modern individual emotions like pride, shame, and personal betrayal. The clash results in chaos.

3. **Masculinity and Honor:**

Zifa's refusal to accept his condition and his inability to tolerate the idea of another man impregnating his wife highlight toxic masculinity and the importance of pride in male identity.

LITERARY TECHNIQUES

1. **Symbolism:**

- *The Goat's Cry*: Represents suffering, fate, and the unheeded warnings that echo throughout the play.
- *The Sea*: A recurring image in Clark's work, symbolizing finality, death, and the eternal. Zifa walks into it to end his life, as though returning to nature or the gods.
- *The Pot*: During the goat sacrifice, it represents sexual union; its breaking signifies the breakdown of spiritual and marital purity.

2. **Poetic Dialogue:**

Clark's use of lyrical language elevates ordinary speech to a musical, rhythmic quality, drawing from African oral traditions and Greek tragedy.

3. **Chorus and Greek Structure:**

The neighbors function like a Greek chorus, commenting on events and reflecting community perspectives. The structure of the play mimics a four-part classical tragedy.

4. **Foreshadowing:**

Orukorere's visions and cryptic warnings foreshadow doom, highlighting the inevitability of fate when traditional codes are broken.

5. **Irony:**

Zifa seeks to preserve his honor and house by rejecting a ritual, but it is his resistance that leads to complete dishonor and the family's destruction.

6. **Tragic Hero:**

Zifa is a modern tragic hero flawed, proud, and ultimately destroyed by forces both internal (his ego) and external (tradition and divine punishment).