

## CHAPTER 2 Poetry

### POST MORTEM by Wole Soyinka & KUBLA KAHN by S.T. Coleridge

#### “POST MORTEM” by Wole Soyinka

There are more functions to a freezing plant  
than stocking beer; cold biers of mortuaries  
submit their dues, harnessed – glory be! –

Is the cold hand of death ...  
his mouth was cotton filled, his man-pike  
shrunk to sub-soil grub.

His head was hollowed and his brain  
on scales – was this a trick to prove  
fore-knowledge after death?

His flesh confesses what has stilled  
his tongue; masked fingers think from him  
to learn, how not to die.  
Let us love all things of grey; gray slabs  
gray scalped, one grey sleep and form,  
grey images.

#### Background of the Poet

Wole Soyinka, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, was born on 13th July, 1934 at Ake, Abeokuta of an Ijebu father and an Egba mother. His father was a school master and his mother a trader. After his elementary schooling at Abeokuta, he went to Government College, Ibadan after a preparatory year at Abeokuta Grammar School. He was admitted into the University College at Ibadan where he spent two academic years (1952 – 54). He later went to Leeds in England where he obtained a degree in English.

#### Subject Matter

The poem “Post Mortem” is about the efforts and limitations of science and the mystery of human existence. The first stanza of the poem starts by stating that there are more functions which human beings (the aged) could perform. Even biers of mortuaries have what they contribute to the society. In stanza two, the poet’s view is that when human existence ends, technologies are still in search. In stanza three, human knowledge is respected but still measured or limited. The poet asked, ‘Was this a trick to prove fore-knowledge after death?’ In stanza four, he confesses what has kept him mute and disappointed; and in shame he covers himself, not thinking he will die. In the last stanza, the poet faces reality when he realizes that he will grow old. He says let us love all things of old age. Let us love the old ways of doing things, even the old methods or forms. Even the old pictures.

## Themes

The following are the main themes in the poem:

- (a) **The theme of limitation:** Here the freezing plant which is a metaphor for old age is limited that he can only be stocking beer. He is also limited in his existence, though his knowledge is praised.
- (b) **The theme of productivity:** Cold biers of mortuaries submit their dues. Thus, the cold biers are useful and productive, and human beings should also be productive.
- (c) **The theme of science and technology:** His man-pike shrunk to sub-soil grub. With all man's efforts in science and technology he will still go down to the soil.
- (d) **The theme of disappointment:** Man is disappointed that he is covered with shame to learn how not to die.
- (e) **The love of nature:** The poet calls attention to the love of nature. The love of natural ways of doing things, even the love of the old ways and styles.

## Language and Style

The poem is a triplet stanza. The language is ironic with elevated style.

### Poetic Devices

**Imagery/Symbols:** The use of symbols is the major literary device in this poem, apart from its purpose, beauty or aesthetic values. This device allows the poet not to be in direct confrontation with the persons represented with the poetic characteristics. "a freezing plant" is a symbol of a dying or aged person. The colour "grey" is another symbol of old age.

**Repetition:** This is another device used in the poem. Its main purpose is emphasis. Let us love all things grey; grey slabs, gray scapel, one gray sheep and form grey images.

**Pun:** This is another device used in the poem. It is used when words or phrases, which although may have similar sounds, possess different meaning – beer and bier.

**Alliteration:** This is a device where there is repetition of the same consonant sounds, e.g. sub and grub head and hallowed

**Personification:** This is a device used in poetry when an inanimate being is given the quality or attribute of a human, e.g. "the cold hand of death".

## Sample Questions on "POST MORTEM"

There are more functions to a freezing plant  
than stocking beer; cold biers of mortuaries  
submit their dues, harnessed – glory be! –

Is the cold hand of death ...  
his mouth was cotton filled, his man-pike  
shrunk to sub-soil grub  
his head was hollowed and his brain

on scales – was this a trick to prove  
fore-knowledge after death?

His flesh confesses what has stilled  
his tongue; masked fingers think from him  
to learn, how not to die.

Let us love all things of grey; gray slabs  
gray scalped, one grey sleep and form,  
grey images.

### Essay Questions

1. Discuss the subject matter of the poem.
2. Comment on four themes in the poem.
3. Comment on four poetic devices used in the poem.

### Answer to Essay Question 2

There are a few themes that can be drawn from the poem “Post Mortem” but our focus here will be to comment on four of the themes.

1. **The theme of science and technology:** His man-pike shrunk to sub-soil grub. With all man’s efforts in science and technology, he will still go down to the soil. He is of the view that when human existence ends technologies will still be in search.
2. **The theme of limitation:** The human knowledge is respected but still measured or limited. The freezing plant which is a metaphor for old age is limited that he can only be a stocking bear. He is also limited in his existence, though his knowledge is extorted.
3. **Productivity:** This theme is seen in the first stanza “... cold biers of mortuaries submit their dues ...” Therefore, everyone under the earth should be ready to produce his or her kind.
4. **Death:** There is the theme of death which makes one limited. When it occurs, man’s mouth is cotton-filled, and he gets shrunk to sub-soil grub.

### Objective Questions

1. ‘Is the cold hand of death’ is an example of \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. metaphor B. personification C. allusion D. irony
2. ‘Let us love all’ is an example of \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. euphemism B. allusion C. synecdoche D. imagery
3. ‘His flesh confesses what has stilled his tongue’ is an example of \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. metaphor B. irony C. allusion D. personification
4. ‘Things of grey, gray slabs, grey scaped’ is an example of \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. assonance B. alliteration C. allusion D. metaphor
5. The expression “a freezing plant” is an example of \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. irony B. personification C. allusion D. metaphor

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

5 Down to a sunless sea.

So twice five miles of fertile ground

With walls and towers were girdled round:

And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills

Where blossom'd many an incense-bearing tree;

10 And here were forests ancient as the hills,

Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But O, that deep romantic chasm which slanted

Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!

A savage place! as holy and enchanted

15 As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted

By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,

As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,

A mighty fountain momentarily was forced;

20 Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst

Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,

Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:

And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever

It flung up momentarily the sacred river.

25 Five miles meandering with a mazy motion

Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,

Then reach'd the caverns measureless to man,

And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far.

30 Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure

Floated midway on the waves;

Where was heard the mingled measure

From the fountain and the caves.

35 It was a miracle of rare device,

A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer

In a vision once I saw:

It was an Abyssinian maid,

40 And on her dulcimer she play'd,

Singing of Mount Abora.

Could I revive within me,

Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,  
45 That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!  
And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
50 His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

### Essay Questions

1. What major themes are treated in the poem?
2. Discuss the style of the poem.
3. What major poetic devices are used in the poem?

### Answer to Essay Question 2

The poem's style is high as well as the form. The language is highly stylised with strong emphasis on sound devices that change between the poem's original two stanzas. The first stanza of the poem describes Kublan Khan's dome built alongside a sacred river fed by powerful fountain. The second stanza of the poem adopts a style where the narrator responds to the power and effects of an Abyssinian maid's song, which enraptures him but leaves him unable to act on her inspiration unless he could hear her once again.

This poem is a romantic poem which promotes the celebration of nature and also describes the poet as a "creator". His diction is simple and has a descriptive format with the use of adjectives that provoke the reader's imagination.

The poem relies on many sound-based devices, such as rhymes and alliteration. The rhyming scheme found in the first seven lines is repeated in the next seven lines and so on. There is the use of assonance which is the repetition of vowel sounds for example, "xan", "du", "ku". There is also the use of alliteration which is the repetition of consonant sounds. We have such examples as: "Kubla Khan", "dome decree", "sunless sea".

The first lines of the poem exhibit the iambic scheme tetrameter with the initial stanza relying on heavy stresses. The lines of the second stanza incorporate lighter stresses to increase the speed of the meter to separate them from the hammer-like rhythm of the previous lines.

There is transition in narration from a third person narrative about Kubla Khan into the poet discussing his role as a poet. All these techniques are employed to enhance the beauty of the poem.

### Objective Questions

6. "With walls and towers were girdled round" is an example of  
A. metaphor B. irony C. assonance D. alliteration

7. "It was an Abyssinian maid" is an example of \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. allusion B. personification C. irony D. metaphor
8. "But oh! That deep romantic chasin which slanted  
Down the green hull atward a cedam Cover"  
This is an example of \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. synecdoche B. metaphor C. repetition D. allusion
9. "A savage place! as holy and enchanted \_\_\_\_\_.  
As e'er beneath a warning moon was haunted"  
is an example of \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. irony B. metaphor C. simile D. personification
10. "And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!"  
This is an example of \_\_\_\_\_.  
A. allusion B. metaphor C. repetition D. irony