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## UNIT 2 WOLE SOYINKA'S LIFE AND WORK

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### Structure

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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We now move on to Wole Soyinka's life and his work. Along with biographical details this unit also mentions Soyinka's literary output so one gets the sense of the way in which his literary career unfolds. Contemporary developments in Nigerian politics are also mentioned because as stated earlier, politics is what Soyinka's work



springs from, and changes in the political situation affect both his life and his work. For example, he has to seek political asylum in the United States and this in turn affects the way he writes about Nigeria in his work. All three, his life, his work, and Nigerian politics, must be seen as a totality and not as separate elements.

Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka (pronounced Shoy-ING-ka) was the second child of Samuel Ayodele and Grace Eniola Soyinka. He was born on the 13<sup>th</sup> of July, 1934. He spent his childhood in Abeokuta, on the Ogun river, in Western Nigeria. From 1954 to 1959 he was in England studying at the University of Leeds and then later in London, working. In 1960 he returned to Nigeria to do research, write and direct plays. Since the '60s he has published novels, poetry, autobiography, plays which have established his international reputation. He visited Europe and America frequently and finally moved to the latter to escape tyrannical political regimes in Nigeria. In 1986 he won the Nobel Prize for literature. Today, he is known as one of the foremost African writers, having written around twenty books in such various genres as drama, poetry, novels, autobiography, memoirs, criticism and political commentary.

Chronological List of Wole Soyinka's Major Works (genre in parenthesis only if not mentioned in title)

- A Dance of the Forests* 1963 (play)  
*The Lion and the Jewel* 1963 (play)  
*The Swamp Dwellers* 1963 (play)  
*Before the Blackout* 1965 (play)  
*The Interpreters* 1965 (novel)  
*The Road* 1965 (play)  
*'Idanre' and Other Poems* 1967  
*Kongi's Harvest* 1967 (play)  
*The Trials of Brother Jero* 1969 (play)  
*Madmen and Specialists* 1972 (play)  
*The Man Died* 1972 (prison notes)  
*A Shuttle in the Crypt* 1972 (poetry)  
*Bacchae of Euripides: a Communion Rite* 1973 (dramatic adaptation)  
*Camwood on the Leaves* 1973 (play)  
*Season of Anomy* 1973 (novel)  
*Death and the King's Horseman* 1975 (play)  
*Myth, Literature and the African World* 1976 (non-fiction)  
*Ake: The Years of Childhood* 1981 (autobiography)  
*Opera Wonyosi* 1981 (play)  
"Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist" *Shakespeare Survey* 36 1983 (lecture cum essay)  
*A Play of Giants* 1984 (play)  
*Requiem for a Futurologist* 1985 (play)  
*Isara: A Voyage Around Essay* 1990 (autobiography)  
*Mandela's Earth and Other Poems* 1990  
*A Scourge of Hyacinths* 1992 (play)  
*From Zia, With Love* 1992 (play)  
*Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* 1993  
*The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* 1996  
*Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* 1999

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## 2.2 THE FIFTIES

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**Family, Birth, Childhood and Early Education:** From the first volume of Soyinka's autobiography, *Ake* (1981), we learn of his Yoruba parents and the place he lived in. Ake, in the Abeokura region. At this time Nigeria was still a British

dependency. His father, Samuel Ayodele, was a teacher and later a headmaster of a school. His mother, Grace Eniola, dubbed "wild Christian" in Ake, was born into the large and influential Egba family which pioneered the spread of Christianity through Western Nigeria. They were also well-known for composing music which fused the Yoruba and European traditions. His great grandfather, the Rev. J.J. Ransome-Kuti, was politically inclined, and in 1905 became famous for preaching at St. Paul's Cathedral. Soyinka's uncle was a public figure and his aunt was for many years a leading figure in the women's movement in Nigeria.

His mother was a huge influence on Soyinka. She was a teacher, a performer and a political activist; she also ran a shop opposite Alake's palace. She made sure that her son was exposed to all aspects of the Yoruba life as well as being aware of politics in the larger world outside. (Ake had been a major base for European colonial activities in Western Nigeria since 1842.) There was quite a contrast between the life in Ake and the society of Soyinka's father's home town, Isara, in the Ijebu region. Isara was relatively isolated from the Christian influence and the people there had little contact with white traders, and so the Yoruba influence, both culturally and spiritually, was marked.

Soyinka, like other Yorubas, has three names: Akinwande Oluwole Soyinka. A Yoruba child is born with one name, "Amutorunwa," christened with a second, "Abiso," and has an attributive name, "Oriki." In Soyinka's case, "Olu," used as a compound in Oluwole, originally belonged to a child of high or princely birth. "Akin," in Akinwande means strength or the strong one. Soyinka's parents' adherence to the traditional naming procedure suggests the traditional base of their family. Predictably, perhaps partly as a result of his mother's family's political influence and Christian religion, Soyinka went to St. Peter's Primary School rather than a local Yoruba school. He also spent a year in the grammar school of which his great uncle was in charge.

In 1946 he entered the elite government college at Ibadan, the capital of Western Nigeria. He wrote sketches for the college drama group and won prizes for the poems he recited at the arts festivals. In 1950 he passed his School Certificate examination and went to work as a clerk in Lagos. He read his short stories on the national radio and from then moved on to pioneering Nigerian radio drama.

In October 1952 Soyinka entered the newly-established University College at Ibadan. There he read English, Greek and History. He was extremely active in a number of student activities outside the classroom. He played the lead in a number of theatre productions. He co-founded the fraternity "The Pyrates" and edited the student publication, *The Eagle*. Along with his academic work he continued his creative writing.

After passing the Intermediate Arts examination Soyinka went to the University of Leeds in October 1954. While working for an Honours degree in the School of English, he had G. Wilson Knight, the famous Shakespearean scholar, as his teacher. Wilson Knight was also active in directing a number of classical and modern plays with the students. While at Leeds Soyinka acted with the university theatre group and had his short stories published in the student literary magazine. His interests varied from singing in a rag revue to politics. He was particularly conscious of any racist behaviour. In 1957 he was awarded an upper second class Honours degree.

This period is crucial as being the period of his literary apprenticeship. He drafted two important plays, *The Swamp Dwellers*, a sombre play where the protagonist is caught between the poisonous old order of the rotten swamp and the soulless new order of urban life, and *The Lion and the Jewel*, one of the most sparkling and

successful of his early plays. The latter was read on behalf of the Royal Court Theatre, in Sloane Square, London, and the young playwright was invited to be a part of the activities of the Royal Court Theatre as a script reader.

In 1958 Soyinka moved to London where he taught, did broadcasts and wrote. The theatre was very much a part of his life. Under the leadership of whom he would later call "that remarkable theatre-manager George Devine," Soyinka was introduced to the early work of the innovative and experimental playwrights John Osborne, Edward Bond, Arnold Wesker, N. F. Simpson, John Arden and Harold Pinter who were later to become icons, as well as the work of those he called "stylistic and ideological pariahs:" Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht (Maja-Pearce 2). He directed a group called the Nigeria Drama Group in a production of *The Swamp Dwellers* in December 1958 as part of the annual University of London Drama Festival. In February 1959 both *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel* were produced at the Arts Theatre, Ibadan, to an enthusiastic audience. Also in 1959 Soyinka composed a song against British colonial violence in Kenya. In November 1959 he directed "An Evening" of his own work in the theatre where plays like *The Invention*, a satire about how an accidental missile explosion eliminates the dark pigment in African skin, were performed. Soyinka was becoming more and more agitated about racism, about apartheid and increasingly interested in the techniques employed by Black American playwrights and fiction writers to deal with the issue of racism. It was at this time that he was gradually evolving into a playwright who employs the idiom of African art to write plays in English, plays that respond to contemporary events, plays that are highly politically conscious, without being mere propaganda pieces.

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## 2.3 THE SIXTIES

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In 1960, hearing that Nigeria was to become independent, Soyinka returned to Nigeria. From 1960 to 1962 he was travelling all over the country on a Rockefeller Foundation grant in order to study the traditional drama of Western Africa. This was an enormously fruitful and productive time. As he travelled Soyinka studied the extended dramatic structure of the Yoruba religious rituals and the festival performances. The harvest festivals, the initiation ceremonies, the rites for the dead, all these involved community participation in highly structured rituals that extended over days or even weeks. These rituals used music, dance, masquerade and symbolic acts to link living and unseen forces. We can see the influence of these dramatic rituals in *A Dance of the Forests* and other plays. It is also important to note that Soyinka imbibed the dramatic structure of these ritual performances, a structure that incorporated elements like the masquerade and the play-within-a-play, songs and dances. This sort of structure was quite different from the shapes of plays belonging to the western theatre tradition, particularly the classical tradition, which he had studied and seen performed in England.

At this time Soyinka was also attached to the English department at the University of Ibadan. He had friends in the radio and television business as well as among editors of journals looking for Nigerian writers. Soyinka joined and became the leader of this community of artists and young, creative people. In 1960 *The Swamp Dwellers* was broadcast along with two new radio plays, *Camwood on the Leaves* and *The Tortoise*. Soyinka also took part in radio talks and discussions. He wrote a T.V. play called *My Father's Burden*, and a stage play, a one-act farce, called *The Trials of Brother Jero*. All the plays were produced and, in fact, *The Trials of Brother Jero*, a satire on the Bar Beach sects at Lagos and the story of a wily religious charlatan who outwits his disciples and creditors, has remained one of Soyinka's most popular plays.

Soyinka formed a group called "1960 Masks" with some friends who were experienced amateur performers. In 1960, in Lagos and Ibadan, *A Dance of the Forests*, the play in our syllabus, was produced by this group. This was a revised version of an earlier anti-apartheid play called *The Dance of the African Forest*. In this production Soyinka played the role of Forest Father. This, the group's first stage production, was addressed to Nigeria at the time of Nigeria's independence (October 1, 1960). In this play Soyinka deliberately challenged Nigerians' expectations concerning their country's future in the political sphere. In the field of aesthetics, he challenged his compatriots' assumptions about the form taken by Nigerian theatre written in English.

While the play is undoubtedly complex and confusing, it established Soyinka as the enfant terrible of African theatre. He was seen as a writer who delighted in shocking, unsettling and confusing his audience, an independent thinker, an ambitious playwright, one who set out to pillage and combine, often uncomfortably, both Yoruba and western dramatic traditions, and a man of undoubted theatrical skills. The relationship between Soyinka and the Nigerian public remained ambivalent, however. This is something I shall examine in greater detail later.

In 1961 Soyinka wrote scripts for a popular weekly radio series called *Broke-Time Bar*. He tried to introduce hard-hitting social and political comment, and this was not very well-received. Soyinka ceased to write for the series--this was one of his early brushes with the establishment. In the same year he was committed to prepare a trilogy of plays for television, *House of Banijegi*, which was only partially realised, and *The Night of the Hunted* and the last, which had no name and only two episodes and was not produced. In the same year Soyinka attended conferences in Italy and the United States. His poetry was published in Sweden. Soyinka also presented a film about Nigerian culture which was sadly reduced to "Culture in Transition" and which contained an abbreviated version of his play *The Strong Breed*, a play about the persistence of scapegoat sacrifices in certain African communities.

He continued to be a regular contributor to Nigerian controversies through the press. To a certain extent, he manipulated the media to influence the people of his country. He attacked a powerful movement called Negritude, he jeered at the expatriate literary critics, he complained of press censorship (this was a time of political violence, victimisation and repression in Nigeria). In 1963 the "1960 Masks" produced a satirical revue written by Soyinka. He got the post of lecturer in English at University College, Ife; however, he didn't last long. In 1963 he resigned along with other faculty members in protest against the state of Emergency that was imposed by the Western Nigerian chief, Awolowo. Soyinka continued his literary criticism in talks and essays.

In 1964 there was a strike and talk of a revolution. Soyinka advocated a people's uprising and worked towards it. At this time there were a number of plays that brought together Nigerian theatre in English with Nigerian theatre in Yoruba. Soyinka contributed *The Lion and the Jewel*. A new group was formed by a band of theatre enthusiasts who were hopeful of becoming professional called "Orisun Theatre." Here the productions were more professional unlike the amateur "1960 Masks."

In 1965 political violence erupted in Western Nigeria. Ministers were murdered and party arson was rampant. Soyinka valiantly produced *Before the Blackout*, an attack on opportunist politicians, corrupt time-servers and conscienceless manipulators. In August that year there was a national crisis. Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* was produced in the Federal Palace Hotel, Lagos. In September 1965 Soyinka travelled

to Britain to read a long poem, "Idanre," as part of the Commonwealth Arts Festival. He acted in an advisory capacity on the production of his metaphysical-satirical play, *The Road*, a play about the meaning of death in a purposeless and transitory existence, which was presented on the fringe of the festival at the Theatre Royal, Stratford. He also took part in a recording of *The Detainee*, a political piece written for the BBC. It warned people against one-party states and dictators. It was broadcast to a large part of Africa although it was not published. In 1965, back in Nigeria, Soyinka was appointed as senior lecturer at the University of Lagos. In this year he published his major novel, *The Interpreters*, which some claim to be the first really modern novel to come out of Africa. There were elections in Nigeria, marred by violence, and Chief S.L. Akintola was declared the winner. Instead of the winner's victory address, the Nigerians heard part of a tape which began, "This is the voice of Free Nigeria" and went on to advise Akintola and his "crew of renegades" to leave the country. Was this a private broadcast? A prank? A rehearsal for an overthrow of the government? Listeners were intrigued and a warrant was issued for the man who was behind it all--Wole Soyinka.

In the trial that followed the arrest, a trial that was occasionally as farcical as parts of *The Trials of Brother Jero*, but which, nevertheless, could have brought a heavy sentence, Soyinka pleaded "Not guilty." He was eventually set free on what some regarded as a technicality. His jubilant supporters hoisted Soyinka on their shoulders and carried him from the court. This trial naturally brought Soyinka a great deal of publicity for some weeks.

The years 1966 and 1967 were turbulent ones for Nigerian politics. At first there was a coup of the radical and progressive officers. Then a counter-coup brought Yakuba Gowon to power. There was a secession of the region of Biafra and Nigeria drifted into civil war. Despite the political upheavals, Soyinka was as productive as ever. He wrote poetry ("Massacre October '66" and "For Her Who Rejoiced") and essays and directed plays like Lindsay Barrett's *Home Again* and Arthur Miller's *Crucible*. Soyinka also completed and submitted for publication the important works, "And After the Narcissist?" (a work of criticism), "Of Power and Change," (a piece of political comment) and "The Fourth Stage: Through the Mysteries of Ogun to the Origin of Yoruba Tragedy" (an important piece of dramatic theory which is included as an appendix under the title 'The Fourth Stage' to his later work *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 1976). Predictably, Soyinka was not silent on the political front either. In his numerous contributions to the Nigerian press he campaigned for appropriate peace initiatives in the north and a cease-fire in the war against Biafra. He also published a furious indictment against those he called "patriots and other sordid racketeers." He was arrested and detained without a trial in August 1967 partly because of the indictment.

Soyinka was detained for twenty-seven long months, fifteen of which were spent in solitary confinement, in the Kaduna Prison. He describes his prison experiences in *The Man Died* which was published only in 1972. The title refers to the fact that the government kept Soyinka incommunicado in an effort to silence his rebellious voice. All the time that he was in prison Soyinka wrote poetry with a quill and cell-manufactured "ink" in between the lines of printed books. He also completed preliminary writing for plays and a novel. Despite the long confinement, the man's spirit could not be broken nor could his hand be stayed.

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## 2.4 THE SEVENTIES

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Once released in October 1969 Soyinka was appointed the director of the school of drama at the University of Ibadan. At this time Soyinka produced his play, *Kongi's Harvest* (a play about the tyranny and cruelty rampant in postcolonial Africa) giving

it an anti-military, anti-Gowon slant. The following year Soyinka prepared the screenplay of *Kongi's Harvest* for a film company. In March and April, 1970, Soyinka acted the lead role of Kongi in front of the film cameras. A few months later, in July, at Soyinka's initiative, the Theatre Arts Company and a department of Theatre Arts was established in Ibadan. Soyinka was invited to the Eugene O'Neill Centre in Waterford, Connecticut in the United States. He took with him an incomplete manuscript of his play *Madmen and Specialists* which he may have begun in prison. While in the United States he added to the script, reworked it and presented it at the Centre and to local black communities. In March 1971 he presented a revised *Madmen and Specialists* back home in Ibadan. The same year, he left Gowon's Nigeria for a "brief exile," which he spent mainly in Europe.

Between 1971 and 1974 Soyinka travelled in many parts of the world, delivering lectures, writing essays, compiling a book of African poetry, writing *The Man Died* and a second novel, *Season of Anomy*, in addition to three important plays. The first of these, *Jero's Metamorphosis*, was like the sketches of the '60s, only longer and more elaborate in form and pessimistic in tone. *The Bacchae* was written on commission from the National Theatre in London and was a radical rewriting of the ancient Greek playwright Euripides's masterpiece. *Death and the King's Horseman* was written while Soyinka was a fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge. It was based on a historical event. At the same time, 1973, as the fellowship at Churchill College, Cambridge, Soyinka was Visiting Professor at Sheffield University, England.

In 1974 Soyinka left Europe for Accra, Ghana. He became the editor of Africa's leading intellectual magazine, *Transition*, and used it to support socialist revolutionary movements in Africa and to attack tyrants like Bokassa and Idi Amin. Around this time he changed his name to Ch'Indaba. He became engaged in a debate with those who regarded him as a reactionary figure because they wanted to radically decolonise African literature. In spite of this ongoing debate, Soyinka joined in the inauguration of the Union of Writers of African Peoples and was elected its General Secretary.

In July 1975 there came another change in the Nigerian political scene: Gowon was overthrown in a coup and Murtala Muhammad came to power at the head of a military government. In December of that year Soyinka returned home and within a month, in January 1976, he was appointed Professor at the University of Ife. Soyinka's alliance with the establishment was an uneasy one, particularly after the assassination of Murtala Muhammad during an attempted putsch. Olusegun Obasanjo then became head of state. Soyinka's *Myth, Literature and the African World*, a collection of lectures delivered in England in 1973, was published in this year. It is an invaluable reference book for those unfamiliar with African drama and the African world-view and written, as he explains, tongue-in-cheek, in the Preface, as a response to those academics in England who "did not believe in any such mythical beast as 'African literature'" (vii).

Nigeria was passing through very trying times. The rise of oil prices in the '70s created an oil-boom economy, and suddenly everyone was out to make a quick fortune. Political corruption was blatant; inequalities in wealth rampant. Intellectuals and artists believed that theatre, like the other arts, should contribute to positive social thinking and a better community sense. To this end, Soyinka took on certain civic responsibilities, such as improving road safety and involving himself in the administration of the second Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture which was held in January, 1977.

In December 1976 Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* was produced, followed, in 1977, by his *Opera Wonyosi*, an adaptation of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. *Opera Wonyosi* attacked, often in song, a number of African tyrants and many of the values, or rather, non-values, of oil-boom Nigeria. This was a large-scale production, held in a well-equipped theatre building. Plans to present the play in Lagos, however, were thwarted by certain reactionary forces. Soyinka then formed a new group called the Guerrilla Theatre Unit of the University of Ife. For this group he began writing little plays or playlets to be performed on the streets, in the marketplaces and in lorry parks--very akin to Indian street theatre. Two such playlets or "hit and run pieces" as they were called, under the title *Before the Blow-Out* followed up the careers of the crooks and charlatans introduced in the *Opera Wonyosi* and in this way commented on the contemporary events surrounding the preparations for a return to civilian rule.

In 1979 Soyinka directed and acted in *The Biko Inquest*, an edited version of the trial of Steve Biko, the South African leader who died in police custody. All the parts were played by black actors. The work was an expose of the inhumanity and deceit inherent in the apartheid of South Africa. The piece was also relevant to Nigeria where police atrocities and a corrupt judiciary were omnipresent. In September and October 1979 Soyinka directed *Death and the King's Horseman* in Chicago. The production was very well-received and another performance was held in Washington D.C. Soyinka was highly acclaimed in the United States, but the picture was slightly different in Nigeria. Although Soyinka made a number of trips back to Nigeria, his people felt he had deserted them at a critical time: Nigerian elections were on. In October Shehu Shagari was elected President. The opposition, the United Party of Nigeria or the UPN, declared that Shagari had won by unfair means. Soyinka's affiliations were with the UPN. Although Soyinka was attracted to the radical socialism of the People's Redemption Party (the PRP), he never joined that party. He said he considered himself a "self-suspended member," since he challenged the attitudes and actions of some of its leaders.

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## 2.5 THE EARLY EIGHTIES

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Soyinka was the chairman of the Oyo State Road Safety Corps, a result of his long association with civic upliftment and his belief that art and artists could make a difference to society. All of 1980 he was very busy with the activities of the Road Safety Corps and in the university life at Ife. The Vice Chancellor of the university, Tunji Aboyade, was his close friend and hunting companion. In December he delivered a lecture on the topic, "The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy and other Mythologies," which continued his debate with the Leftist critics.

In 1981 Soyinka was a visiting professor at Yale University in the United States. He returned to Nigeria frequently. Back in Ife there were a number of pressing public issues: acute water shortage, the collapse of the hostel, overcrowding in student rooms, attacks on the Vice Chancellor, the deaths of four students while taking part in a peaceful demonstration, even ritual murder. Besides being involved in these crises, Soyinka also wrote a brief sketch attacking the racketeering in rice in Nigeria. This play which was presented in the heart of Lagos as part of a demonstration.

In January 1982 Soyinka launched *Ake: The Years of Childhood*, his colourful, funny and intense autobiography of the first eleven or so years of his life, in Abeokuta. This book was begun in Accra and completed after Soyinka's return to Nigeria in 1976. Hailed as a major literary achievement, the work carries enough evidence of Soyinka the dramatist, particularly in its characterisation and dialogue. There is the



description of Mrs. Odufuwa, Soyinka's godfather's wife, visiting their home. Soyinka admired her as "quite simply and without dispute from any but the blindest man with the coarsest sensibilities, the most beautiful woman in the world" (*Ake* 99). She had a trick of giving each child a nickname and the one she chose for Soyinka was Lagilagi, the Log-splitter. However, Joseph objects to the name being inappropriate because Soyinka "cannot *la* anything. He is so lazy he can't move a fly off his nose until it has begun to produce maggots." Adding insult to injury Joseph points to Soyinka's younger brother Dipo and says, " 'Look at his brother, almost three years his junior. He is far tougher than the one you've named Lagilagi. I bet Dipo can already lift that axe and split wood with it.' " Soyinka's mother, Wild Christian, joins in at this point: "All he does is sneak off into corners by himself--reading, always reading. He pretends to be busy with books because he cannot tackle anything else." When Soyinka's sister sniggers, "If you touch him he will faint, then die altogether of fright....let him run under the skirts of his books," and Joseph says "Dipo can give him a thorough beating," Soyinka is impelled to salvage his honour in front of the woman he so admires (he calls Mrs. Odufuwa his "future wife") by beating his younger brother to pulp (*Ake* 99-102). *Ake* is also the work of a man long criticised by fellow Nigerians for being "too European," but the book is full of Yoruba rhymes and phrases, translated only in footnotes, and in no way has Soyinka tried to give his family a Euro-friendly gloss to make them more accessible to the white reader. In fact, at one stage Soyinka recalls the conversation he has with his great-grandfather Ransome-Kuti about the relative merits and demerits of the African schools versus the schools run by the whites. Ransome-Kuti is very surprised that Soyinka has shifted his allegiance from the African AGS schools to those run by the whites: "They teach you to say 'sir' in those schools. Only slaves say 'Sir'. That is one of their ways of removing character from boys at an impressionable age--Sir, sir, sir, sir, sir! Very bad...." (*Ake* 185). When Soyinka explains that the schools run by the whites offer scholarships, Ransome-Kuti thinks he can understand why the boy prefers them. *Ake* proved to be very popular in the United States and England. *The Evening Standard* (England) called it "a major contribution to contemporary English literature that will surely number among the classics of childhood," while the *Village Voice* (U.S.A.) described it as a "superb act of remembrance...dazzling reading."

Soyinka took advantage of the launch of the book to continue his attack on Shagari's government. He listed as the ironic "achievements" of the ruler the Bakolori Massacre, the subversion of the Kano state government, the destruction of the offices of the *Triumph* newspaper, Shuguba's deportation, the storming of the elected legislature, the depletion of the national wealth of Nigeria, the butchering of Bala Muhammad, and the deaths of students, athletes and youth workers at the hands of the police.

In March and April, 1982 Soyinka staged an early radio play of his, *Camwood on the Leaves*, at the National Theatre in Lagos. This play proved that he was interested in more subtle forms of consciousness raising than strident and vituperative social criticism. On 18<sup>th</sup> August, 1982, Soyinka was once again in England, this time delivering the Stratford-on-Avon lecture on "Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist." Influences of Shakespeare can be seen in a number of his plays, including *A Dance of the Forests*. In December of the same year the African service of the BBC broadcast Soyinka's half-hour radio play, *Die Still Rev. Dr. Godspoke!* This play was concerned with the widespread influence of metaphysicians and parapsychologists in Nigeria. In early 1983 Soyinka directed a full-length play, *Requiem for a Futurologist*, and toured with it. This play made fun of the credulous and exposed charlatans in much the same way as *The Trials of Brother Jero*. The play was occasionally accompanied by agit-prop sketches: *Festac 77*, *Green Revolution*, *Ethical Revolution* and others, known collectively as *Priority Projects*.

Here the means of social criticism were spectacle, simple dialogue, hard-hitting lyrics and good music. In July 1983 the songs were recorded and released on a record titled *Unlimited Liability Co.* The title song was one which critiqued the Nigerian government tongue-in-cheek as a badly-run company led by a chairman who lacked the will and the ability to control corrupt directors. The record was sold and broadcast before the August national elections. A little before election day another Soyinka song, "Take the first step," replenished the ammunition of the opposition parties in their campaign to beat Shagari and his National Party of Nigeria (NPN) at the polls.

The elections were predictably violent and turbulent in some states. The results revealed Shagari as the victor once again. Soyinka went to London and through the British press and the African service of the BBC he described the background to the elections, including the manipulation of the western press and the distortions in the official results. He predicted that there would be "a coup or a civil war or a combination of both." Soyinka returned to Ife in spite of threats of police and libel action against *The Man Died*. His predictions were proved right when, on 31 December, 1983, Shagari was overthrown by a coup which brought Muhammad Buhari to power. The abuses of the Shagari government which Soyinka had already pointed out--a vastly corrupt administration, irregularities in the marketing of rice, the construction of a new capital at Abuja--were now cited by the coup makers. Soyinka was, by his own admission, "in the thick of the '83 election" (Maja-Pearce 151). Although Soyinka applauded Buhari's anti-corruption stance, he did not agree with the sweeping ban Buhari imposed on all political parties.

During 1983-84 Soyinka had worked on a film, *Blues for a Prodigal*, which was originally planned, in Soyinka's words, as a "straightforward propaganda film...an almost unambiguous call to arms" (Gibbs 17.) However, after the December coup of the Shagari government, the approach was modified. In February 1984 came the verdict on *The Man Died*: despite the new government, the book was banned. In May 1984 a production of Soyinka's play *The Road* opened in Chicago (where *Death and the King's Horseman* had been so well-received in 1979) and, in December 1984, Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* premiered at Yale University, where he had been a Visiting Professor in 1981. Like *Opera Wonyosi*, *A Play of Giants* is a severe attack on contemporary African dictators like Jen-Bedel Bokassa, the malignant dictator of Central Africa of almost comic-opera proportions, Idi Amin of Uganda, Macias Nguemo of Equatorial Guinea and, of course, General Yakubu Gowon of Soyinka's own Nigeria.

In 1986 Wole Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, to many the ultimate accolade that can be won in one's lifetime. However, Soyinka was not one to let any honour bestowed by the west muffle his tongue or blindfold his conscience. In his acceptance speech, "This Past Must Address Its Present," Soyinka launched a searing attack on the ingrained racism in many of the heavyweights of western culture, Locke, Voltaire, Hegel, Hume, Montesquieu. He felt their works ought to be stamped with the warning, "THIS WORK IS DANGEROUS FOR YOUR RACIAL SELF-ESTEEM" (Maja-Pearce 21). He is amazed that the work of the ethnologist Leo Frobenius, "a notorious plunderer, one of a long line of European archaeological raiders," who laments that the beauties of Yoruba art be left to such "degenerate and feeble-minded posterity" as the Yoruba people, is still revered, even by black scholars (Maja-Pearce 18-19). Such an outspoken attack is typical of Soyinka's courage of conviction and reminds us, what an important agent of social change the artist can still be if he or she is not afraid to speak out.

In 1988 Soyinka was appointed Professor of African Studies and Theatre at Cornell University. *Isara: A Voyage Around Essay* the sequel to *Ake: The Years of Childhood* appeared in 1990 as did *Mandela's Earth and Other Poems*. *From Zia, With Love* (1992) is a cutting expose of contemporary Nigerian politics and society. It is written in much the same vein as Soyinka's earlier play, *Requiem for a Futurologist*, except that the mood seems to be even darker. Soyinka's disenchantment and disillusionment with Nigerian political leaders is by now quite deep-rooted. This is undoubtedly a result of his long political activism, of being able to see these leaders from close quarters. The play *A Scourge of Hyacinths* was also written in the nineties. *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* (1996), an impassioned examination of the contemporary political turbulence in Nigeria, appeared in 1996. In this Soyinka describes what he calls "my 'Rambo' departure from the Nigerian nation space." In this book Soyinka's fury is focussed on a single day--June 23, 1993--and on one man--the brutal military dictator, General Sani Abacha whom Soyinka describes in 1997 as "the most ruthless, unconscionable dictator we have ever known in Nigeria." It was on that day that the country's free and fair elections were annulled and the victor, Moshood Abiola, imprisoned. "Under a dictatorship a nation ceases to exist," says Soyinka in *The Open Sore*. "All that remains is a fiefdom, a planet of slaves regimented by aliens from outer space." Although in Nigeria the opposition has been exiled, imprisoned or driven underground, Soyinka hopes that they are quietly mobilising. The book was named one of the twenty-five best books of 1996 by the American publication *The Village Voice*.

Soyinka fled to the United States in 1995, fearing he was about to be arrested. That self-imposed exile lasts to this day. In March 1997, he was charged with treason. Authorities under the dictator Sani Abacha claimed Soyinka and fourteen others were behind a series of bombings. Since Abacha's death in June, military ruler Abdulsalami Abubakar has freed hundreds of political prisoners, scheduled elections and promised a return to civilian rule. Abubakar dropped the charges against the fifteen people, saying it was a reconciliatory gesture. While Soyinka said "the right thing had been done," he refused to return to Nigeria. Soyinka now spends most of his time in the United States. He has been a Professor in African American Studies at Emory University, Atlanta, U.S.A since 1996. He travels to England and other parts of Europe to deliver talks or to conduct poetry workshops. In a 1993 interview with 'Biyi Bandele Thomas he speaks forcefully about the mess Babangida created in Nigeria--"a divided army, a divided nation, and all because of the...quirks, of the irrationality of one individual and his tiny junta" (Maha-Pearce 148). At one point he laments "something is certainly required, call it ethical rearmament, call it human rearmament, we certainly need some kind of rearmament. And it can only begin with an improvement in the quality of the life of the people, with an evident commencement of transformation of the physical environment, and of course a reduction of corruption" (Maja-Pearce 157.) So we see that the issues that so ignited the young Soyinka are still close to his heart--the amelioration of the lot of the common person, civil liberties, a minimal degree of corruption on the part of the ruling classes accompanied by a large dose of efficiency. He is pragmatic enough to know that no corruption is an impossibility. As he says in the same interview, he'd prefer "a competent crook rather than an incompetent, inept angel" as the head of state (Maja-Pearce 156). He tells John D. Thomas in 1997 that it is his "commitment to the cause" in Nigeria that allows him to teach only a single semester at Emory and to leave the other semester entirely free for his own work. The former military ruler Olusengun Obasanjo won the Nigerian presidential elections in Spring 1999. At the time of this manuscript going to press, he is still the President. For Nigeria, Africa's

most populous country, ruled by the army for the past fifteen years, civilian rule appears very distant. Soyinka's decision not to return is perhaps a wise one in the circumstances.

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## 2.7 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have taken a look at Soyinka's family, his childhood and the four main decades of his eventful life, a life which continues to this day in exile in the United States. Soyinka's family, particularly on the maternal side was a remarkable one and his mother and maternal relations played an important role in his childhood. He was Christian and partly English-educated but he was closely in touch with all things Yoruba. His years in England (he went there on a scholarship) in the late fifties proved to be very fruitful. In Leeds he learnt all about the western theatre tradition, and in London he had hands-on experience working in the Royal Court Theatre. This was the period of his literary apprenticeship, and he drafted and produced two of his early plays, *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel*, in London and in Ibadan, Nigeria.

1960, the year of Nigerian independence, had Soyinka writing and producing *A Dance of the Forests* for the occasion of Nigeria's independence. He travelled all over Nigeria on an American grant studying the traditional drama of Western Africa and the ceremonies and rituals associated with Yoruba festivals--all these were to influence his work. He taught at the University of Ibadan and formed a theatre group called "1960 Masks" which staged *A Dance of the Forests* with Soyinka himself playing Forest Father. Soyinka wrote scripts for radio and television critiquing social ills and wrote to the newspapers at any hint of political controversy. In 1965 Soyinka published his first novel, *The Interpreters*, which some claim is the first really modern novel to come out of Africa. From 1965 onwards there was considerable political unrest in Nigeria with widespread violence. Soyinka, at this time a senior lecturer at Lagos, was arrested for broadcasting a message which advised Akintola, the winner of the elections, to leave the country. After a farcical trial Soyinka was released. In the sixties he remained very productive despite the political turmoil, writing and publishing essays, and staging plays by Miller and Barrett. He was arrested and detained without a trial for twenty-seven months partly because of a furious indictment he wrote of the political regime. Even when in solitary confinement in Kaduna Prison Soyinka did not stop writing. When he was released he was appointed the director of a school of drama at Ibadan. He acted in and produced *Kongi's Harvest*, created a department of Theatre Arts in Ibadan, and travelled to the United States and produced *Madmen and Specialists* there and back home in Ibadan.

In 1971 he left on a brief, self-imposed exile from Gowon's Nigeria and spent the next three years travelling in many parts of the world, lecturing, writing essays, compiling a book of African poetry besides writing plays (*Death and the King's Horseman*, *Opera Wonyosi*) and a second novel. The rest of the decade was spent in Ghana, Nigeria, the United States and Europe, writing plays, having them produced, editing the leading African intellectual magazine *Transition*. All the while governments were being formed and overthrown in a crisis ridden Nigeria.

In the eighties Soyinka undertook a number of civic responsibilities such as being Chairman of the Oyo Road Safety Corps. He divided his time between Yale, where he was Visiting Professor, and Nigeria. He published *Ake*, the vivid account of his childhood, wrote and broadcast radio plays, worked on a film, and managed to be in the thick of the 1983 Nigerian elections as well. While his account of his prison

experience, *The Man Died*, was banned, his plays were being produced quite regularly in the United States. He returned to Ife from London in 1983 despite threats of police and libel action against *The Man Died*. In 1986 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and launched a scathing attack on racism and the misrepresentation of Africa by European scholars in his acceptance speech.

In the late eighties and nineties Soyinka continued to teach in the United States and to write scathing political critiques both in the form of fiction and non-fiction. In 1995 he fled from Nigeria to the United States fearing political persecution. Despite the present Nigerian government's pardon of the 1997 charge of treason, he refuses to return. At present he is on the faculty of Emory University, U.S.A., teaching only a single semester so that he can write ceaselessly for the cause of freedom and an able democracy in Nigeria.

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## 2.8 GLOSSARY

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<b>Pariah:</b>	social outcast
<b>Pillage:</b>	plunder
<b>Enfant terrible:</b>	literally French for "unmanageable child"; a person of startlingly unconventional behaviour and ideas
<b>Negritude:</b>	The quality or characteristic of being a Negro (Black); affirmation of the value of Black or African culture, identity, etc.

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## 2.9 QUESTIONS

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- Q.1. What are the ways in which Soyinka's family and childhood influenced him?
- Q.2. What did Soyinka learn from his apprentice years in London and from touring Nigeria on a Rockefeller grant? Suggest briefly how disparate elements are blended in his work.
- Q.3. Write an essay on Soyinka's political activism.

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## 2.10 SUGGESTED READING

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- Gibbs, James. *Wole Soyinka*. London: Macmillan, 1986.
- Thomas, John D. "A Dramatic Life." Online. Internet. 1 Sep. 1998.
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