

Prayer to Masks (Léopold Sédar Senghor)

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The poet

- Senghor was the first president of Senegal. He was in power from 1960 to 1980.
- He was one of the scholars who developed the concept of 'Negritude', a belief in Africanness, the cultures of Africans, their identity and past, taking only the best elements of other cultures.
- His literary works show his pride in his culture and the history of Africa and a strong message that Africans should be hopeful and positive about the future.
- In Prayer to Masks, Senghor addresses the masks who represent his ancestors, showing respect and pride in his culture.
- The poem is a slight and a broadside directed at the European countries that had colonised Africa.

The title

❖ A prayer is communication with a divine power or deity. Some of its elements are:

- ✓ Praise
- ✓ Adoration
- ✓ Thanksgiving
- ✓ Contrition
- ✓ Seeking guidance

Masks in the West African cultures

- Elderly men of clans. They wear masks at cultural ceremonies and represent the ancestors/ancestral spirits.



The poem in a nutshell

- The speaker is imagining watching a cultural ceremony whereby elderly men, wearing masks, perform a ritual. There is a kaleidoscope of masks (in different colours and shapes). The sight fills the speaker with excitement and awe. He reverently addresses the masks. He says he owes his being and existence to the ancestors. He then reflects on his culture, and the history of colonialism in Africa. He asks the ancestors to guide Africa into the future as she gains freedom and independence from her colonial masters. He concludes with a positive message and optimism in *'the men of dance whose feet only gain power when they beat the hard soil'*. He says the 'new' Africa will inspire new life into the world as she will live in harmony with the natural world.

NOTE

- The poem was published in 1945.
- World War 2 had just ended.
- The European countries that had colonies in Africa and elsewhere in the world were devastated and exhausted by the war.
- They faced both uprisings (and demands for freedom and independence) in the colonies and internal pressure to release the colonies from right-wing groups.
- Many gradually introduced reforms that gave some freedoms and powers to the colonies.
- In the 1950s through to the 1960s many colonies gained independence.

Analysis

Lines 1- 4

1 Masks! Oh Masks!
2 Black mask, red mask, you black
and white masks,
3 Rectangular masks through
whom the spirit breathes,
4 I greet you in silence!

Commentary

- The speaker (seemingly at a cultural ceremony) is watching elderly men wearing masks performing a cultural ritual.
- The men represent the ancestors of various clans.
- The sight makes him exclaim with awe and excitement. He greets the 'masks' reverently.

continue

Line 5

5 And you too, my lionheaded ancestor.

Commentary

- The speaker recognises, among the masks, his clan/family guardian, the lion.

N.B. A lion is a national symbol and totem of Senegal.

Senghor could be referring to his own father, Diogoye (meaning, lion in his language)

continue

Lines 6 - 7

6 You guard this place, that is closed to any feminine laughter, to any mortal smile.

7 You purify the air of eternity, here where I breathe the air of my fathers.

Commentary

- His ancestors protect the place of worship/Senegal (or even Africa).
- Africa (culture) is patriarchal.
- The ancestors are responsible for his existence. They make it possible for him to live/he owes his being and existence to his ancestors.

continue

Line 8

- Masks of maskless faces, free from dimples and wrinkles.

Commentary

- His ancestors are ageless, flawless and perfect.

N.B. As representatives of the ancestors, these masks are spirits/representation of the spiritual realm.

continue

Lines 9

9 You have composed this image,
this my face that bends over the
altar of white paper.

Commentary

- The ancestors made him. He is who he is because of his ancestors.
- The speaker is busy writing on a piece of paper (an allusion/reference to European culture).

continue

Line 10

10 In the name of your image,
listen to me!

Commentary

- The speaker makes an earnest and desperate plea (See the punctuation) to the ancestors to hear him out.
- He pleads for guidance/help.

continue

Lines 11 - 12

11 Now while the Africa of
despotism is dying – it is the agony
of a pitiable princess,

12 Like that of Europe to whom she
is connected through the navel -

Commentary

- Africa is gradually being released from the shackles of colonialism and stands as ‘a pitiable princess’ (she has been stripped off her beauty/raw materials/dignity).
- Africa remains dependent/reliant on Europe like an embryo connected to the mother through an umbilical cord.

continue

Line 13

13 Now fix your immobile eyes upon
your children who have been called

Commentary

- The ancestors are always watching over us ('immobile eyes').
- Africans are often referred to as the 'chosen' because of their uniqueness, resilience and the ability to endure suffering.
- Africa has been singled out by European countries for their subjugation, abuse, etc.

continue

Line 14 - 15

14 And who sacrifice their lives like the poor man his last garment

15 So that hereafter we may cry 'here' at the rebirth of the world being the leaven that the white flour needs.

Commentary

- Africans are laying down their lives fighting for freedom and independence.
- They give up everything they have like a poor man who gives up his blanket when the powerful men demand it (Biblical allusion)
- The movement for freedom is growing and more and more African countries are demanding independence (rising up against colonial rule)

continue

Lines 16 - 18

16 For who else would teach rhythm
to the world that has died of
machines and cannons?

17 For who else should ejaculate the
cry for joy, that arouses the dead
and the wise in a new dawn?

18 Say, who else could return the
memory of life to men with a torn
hope?

Commentary

- Africa is at a point of rebirth.
- Africa will provide life-impulse to the world (unlike Europe that is inclined to wars/violence).
- The new dawn will bring joy to the world.
- It is Africa that will give hope to the downtrodden.

continue

Lines 19 - 20

19 They call us cotton heads, and
coffee men, and oily men.

20 They call us men of death.

Commentary

- Africa is insulted/called names/ridiculed. Africans are called savages ('men of death').
- The derogatory names also make reference to the raw materials that the European countries plundered and extorted from Africa: cotton, coffee, oil, etc.
- Africans are unafraid to lay down their lives for their freedom.

continue

Line 21

21 But we are the men of the
dance whose feet only gain power
when they beat the hard soil.

Commentary

- The 'new Africa'/the Africa that is emerging from colonialism, will have a different relationship with the land and the natural resources.
- The 'new Africa' will live in harmony with the natural world.

TONE

- The poem begins with a tone of excitement, reverence and awe. The speaker expresses pride in his culture.
- It gradually moves into pity and melancholy, then urgent desperation as the speaker reflects on the past of the continent.
- The poem ends on a positive note. The speaker says there is hope for Africa (and the world) as the new Africa will live in harmony with the natural world.

THEMES

1. Pride in one's culture and history.
2. Nostalgia.
3. Glorification of Africa.
4. Criticism of Western civilization and colonialism.
5. Optimism about the future of Africa.

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Does the poet portray a realistic or idealised/romanticised picture of Africa? Motivate your response.
2. The poem is a slight and a broadside directed at European countries. Do you agree or disagree. Motivate your response.
3. Considering the current state of Africa. Would you say the poet's prophecy in the last lines of the poem has been realised? Justify your response.
4. List the positive things that the speaker mentions about his culture.
5. List the aspects of prayer evident in this poem.