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AN AFRICAN ELEGY – BEN OKIRI

**We are the miracles that God made
To taste the bitter fruit of Time.
We are precious.
And one day our suffering
Will turn into the wonders of the earth. 5**

**There are things that burn me now
Which turn golden when I am happy.
Do you see the mystery of our pain?
That we bear poverty
And are able to sing and dream sweet things 10**

**And that we never curse the air when it is warm
Or the fruit when it tastes so good
Or the lights that bounce gently on the waters?
We bless things even in our pain.
We bless them in silence. 15**

**That is why our music is so sweet.
It makes the air remember.
There are secret miracles at work
That only Time will bring forth.
I too have heard the dead singing. 20**

**And they tell me that
This life is good
They tell me to live it gently
With fire, and always with hope.
There is wonder here 25**

**And there is surprise
In everything the unseen moves.
The ocean is full of songs.
The sky is not an enemy.
Destiny is our friend.**

30

UNDERSTANDING THE POEM

- Traditionally, an elegy is a mournful poem that often focuses on death.
- Okri's elegy, however, is not mournful; rather it is reflective and thoughtful.
- The speaker asks the unique African spirit for answers to life's paradoxes. He explores the miracle of what being African means to him: the endurance for suffering, the ability to find joy and beauty in the midst of pain, a spiritual union with nature's bounty, and an irrepressible sense of optimism despite all indicators pointing in the opposite direction.
- The speaker seems to believe that the tendency to hope and the sensitivity to recognise wonder is a shared trait of Africa's people.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

- Okri has made use of a structure where each stanza is of equal five line length, giving the form regularity and a distinct pattern.
- There are a variety of line lengths within each stanza; the short lines are somewhat isolated from the enclosing lines, and for this reason they tend to 'stand out' for being short.
- The line breaks add an additional dimension to the interpretation of the poem as this promotes multiple interpretations.

POETIC/LANGUAGE DEVICES

- The poet's diction reflects his interest in African mysticism. He uses words that have religious overtones, such as 'miracles' (lines 1 and 18), 'mystery' (line 8) and 'bless' (line 14 and 15). He implies that all Africans are able to bear poverty and hardship because they 'are the miracles that God made' (line 1).

SOUND DEVICES

- This is a poem that demands to be read aloud. The pauses, bound by the punctuation and line breaks, create a rhythm that contributes significantly to the reader's appreciation and understanding of the poem.

QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED ANSWERS

1. Make a list of all the positive things that Okri says about Africa and being African.
African people are 'miracles' (line 1), 'precious' (line 3), 'able to sing and dream sweet things' (line 10), they 'never curse' (line 11) but rather 'bless' (lines 14 and 15), their 'music is so sweet' (line 16) and they live life 'gently' (line 23) and 'with hope' (line 24). Africa, the land, is positive as the air 'is warm' (line 11), the fruit 'tastes so good' (line 12) and the land has both 'wonder' (line 25) and 'surprise (line 26), while the ocean is full of songs' (line 28).
2. What do you think the speaker means by the line 'We are precious?' (line 3)
The speaker suggests that in their endurance and optimism, the people are rare and unusual, they have worth and value.

3. Does the speaker respect the dead? What makes you say this?
The 'they' of line 21 may be the 'dead' giving the speaker advice, and his careful noting of their words could imply respect for them and their views.
4. How does the poet connect each negative aspect in the poem with something positive?
The speaker's message is centred on reconciling negatives in a positive way: the 'suffering' (line 4) will turn into 'wonders' (line 5); the negative of 'burn' (line 6) will become 'golden' (line 7); 'poverty' (line 9) is drowned out with song and sweet dreams; despite 'pain' (line 14), 'We bless things' (line 14). Thus, each negative element is transformed into a positive.
5. Explain how one can live life 'gently/With fire' (line 23 – 24).
To live 'gently/With fire' (lines 23 – 24) may mean to live peacefully, not to cause harm to others or one's surroundings, yet to be able to feel deeply and passionately. It could suggest not allowing strong emotions to spill over and become destructive; perhaps to have strong convictions and principles, but to maintain respect and consideration for the world being inhabited.
6. Do you think Okri is being overly idealistic, or do you agree with what he is saying about Africa and Africans? Motivate your answer.
No, Okri's message is perfectly believable and plausible in that there are many living in Africa in dire poverty who remain cheerful and convinced that a better life lies ahead. There is much talk of this being the African century, and as the continent continues to develop and prosper, so lives will improve and poverty and pain will be greatly diminished.

OR

Yes, Okri is being hopeful and positive with no valid reason for his claims. People simply have to believe that matters will eventually improve, as to contemplate anything else would be intolerable. Africa will continue to be exploited by resource-hungry foreigners who will do little to improve the lives of Africans. Power-hungry dictators will continue to cling to power and the wealth of African countries will only be enjoyed by an elite minority while the majority continue to scrape out an existence.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED ANSWERS

1. Refer to line 8: 'Do you see the mystery of our pain?'
Explain this 'mystery' in your own words. (2)
The puzzle or 'mystery' (line 8) is how the people in the village can remain optimistic and find pleasure in life amid the suffering, hunger, deprivation and misery that surrounds them. (1)

Instead of being miserable and bitter, these people make beautiful music and dream of 'sweet things' (line 10) and are able to see life as 'good' (line 22). (1) (2)

2. Describe the poet's attitude in the third stanza. (2)

The attitude in the third stanza is positive. (1)

They are able to appreciate the simple reward that nature provides – sweet tasting fruit, the sensation of warm air and the physical beauty around them – and express this gratitude in silent blessings, despite their 'pain' (line 8). (1) (2)

3. Comment on the effectiveness of the imagery in the final stanza. (3)

The final stanza uses imagery to describe the wonders of nature and its mysterious, almost magical powers. (1)

The positive outlook is reflected in the ocean that is 'full of songs' (line 28) as if this elemental force is celebrating and encouraging. The sky is 'not an enemy' (line 29) but rather a sign of promise and better things to come. (1)

The final line asserts that ultimately reward will come as fate, or 'destiny', is on the side of the suffering African people. (1) (3)

4. The speaker appears determined to maintain a positive, optimistic attitude despite negative circumstances. How do you respond to the speaker? Does the speaker convince you? Support your answer with evidence from the poem. (3)

While much of the poem points out positive things and the speaker claims that ultimately all this suffering will end and the reward will follow, it is unclear that the speaker himself is entirely convinced of this view. (1)

To claim that 'we are the miracles' (line 1) and 'precious' (line 3), perhaps implies the unlikely truth of a transformation into 'wonders of the earth' (line 5). He mentions the 'things that burn me now' (line 6) which is unmistakably negative. (1)

The most revealing evidence to suggest the speaker's determination to embrace this positive attitude in the face of such difficult circumstances, is the line 'they tell me that/This life is good' (line 21-22), which could imply that others adopt this view, but he has yet to absorb it fully. (1). (3)

5. **WHAT IS THE THEME OF THE POEM "AN AFRICAN ELEGY" BY BEN OKRI?**

The speaker is saying that even though we may not understand the reason for suffering and death, we should be hopeful that this mystery, like many other of life's mysteries, will one day be revealed to us; the only thing we can do now is appreciate life, with all its inherent mysteries. When describing this aspect of life in the penultimate stanza and the first two lines of the last stanza, he says "There is wonder here. / And there is surprise / In everything the unseen moves."

Ultimately, this poem seems to be an assertion in God's overall plan for humankind, despite the fact that we may not fully understand that plan.

Rather than fear that plan, the speaker believes that “*Destiny is our friend*” and that we should embrace it.

MORE QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED ANSWERS

1. REFER TO STANZA 1.

- 1.1 Who are the ‘miracles that God made’?
The people of Africa [Of course, all human beings are ‘miracles of God’ but by using the word ‘African’ in the title, Okri provides a specific context.]
- 1.2 Why does the poet use the first-person-plural pronoun in these opening lines?
By using ‘We’, the poet personalises his message and creates an association with his readers. In this context, the ‘we’ emphasises that the poet (or speaker) is part of the African community.
- 1.3 Identify figures of speech in the line, ‘To taste the bitter fruit of Time’, and comment on their effectiveness.
There are several allusions: ‘bitter fruit’ could refer to God’s punishment in the Garden of Eden; ‘Time’ could refer to Father Time from Greek mythology (personified as a bearded old man holding a scythe and an hourglass).

The personification of ‘Time’, as indicated by the capital letter, gives ‘Time’ mythological significance and emphasises that this is an important theme in the poem. [Note that ‘Time’ appears again later in the poem.]

The combination of words in ‘bitter fruit’ is an example of an oxymoron: when two words contradict each other as in a paradox. We think of ‘fruit’ as sweet in contrast to something ‘bitter’. This paradox infers that in time, suffering can lead to something better.
- 1.4 How do the sound devices enhance the meaning of the line referred to in 1.3?
The repetition of the ‘t’ sound emphasises the words ‘bitter’, ‘fruit’ and ‘Time’ (the climax of the sentence). The alliteration also forces the reader to pronounce each word adding to the solemnity of the line and the appropriate seriousness of the speaker’s tone of voice.

2. REFER TO STANZA 2

- 2.1 Discuss the imagery in the line: ‘There are things that burn me now/Which turn golden when I am happy’.

The word 'burn' gives the reader an idea of how the poet feels about Africa – he feels passionate about his country and its people. If something burns it also causes pain. It can create scars. In this sense, the poet carries these scars and will experience feelings of sadness and anger. When he is happy, these feelings 'turn golden'. The word 'golden' can be associated with something precious and rare; something memorable and worthwhile. This suggests that at these times he feels that all he has suffered has been worth it. When life is good, he appreciates his happiness even more having experienced sorrow or hardships.

- 2.2 Comment on the purpose of the rhetorical question.
The rhetorical question addresses the reader directly, thus fully engaging the reader's attention and at the same time placing more focus on the poet's central idea about the 'mystery of the pain' – that inexplicable quality that Africans have which enables them to 'bear' the weight of poverty and still be able to 'sing and dream sweet things'.

3. REFER TO STANZA 3

- 3.1 Comment on the juxtaposition of the words 'curse' and 'bless'.
The words 'curse' and 'bless' are used paradoxically in the sense that the poet uses 'curse' for positive experiences and 'bless' for negative experiences instead of the other way around. This suggests that Africans have the ability to accept life as it comes. Even in times of suffering, they are able to find joy and when things are going well they do not forget to show their gratitude.
- 3.2 Discuss the poet's use of sensory imagery in the first lines of this stanza.
The poet uses the sense of touch (warm 'air'), taste ('fruit') and sight ('lights on the waters') to give the reader a greater sense of those positive moments in life: when you are warm, well fed and have time to enjoy the wonders of nature.

4. REFER TO STANZA 4.

- 4.1 The poet first referred to 'the air' in stanza 3. In this stanza, the personification is more noticeable. What do you think he means by 'the air' and what do you think 'the air' remembers?
In stanza 3, 'the air' can be understood in the literal and figurative sense but his second reference makes it clear that 'the air' is something more mystical/spiritual. If 'the air' is the spirit of the Ancestors, it stands to reason that they would remember a person's past or heritage.

- 4.2 Suggest what the poet means when he describes the miracles as 'secret'.
To be 'secret' means that these 'miracles' cannot be seen or known, or that they are not meant to be seen or known. The religious overtones ('miracles of God') and the references to African mysticism ('the air' and 'the dead singing') remind us that there are some things that are beyond ordinary understanding.
- 4.3 Look closely at the single sentence at the end of this stanza and say why it is so effective.
As a stand-alone sentence, the reader is forced to stop at the end of the stanza. This pause gives the reader time to register what the poet has just said, thus emphasising the statement and creating anticipation for what follows. The sudden change to 'I' also gives the reader the sense that he is being allowed to share in one of the poet's secrets. This makes the poet's argument more personal and even more convincing.
- 4.4 Why is it important for the poet to have heard 'the dead singing'?
Ancestors play an important role in African tradition. As an African, the poet would wish to feel these connections with his past.

5. REFER TO STANZA 5

Explain the paradox of living 'gently / With fire'.
While 'living gently' suggests living quietly, carefully and without any fuss, 'with fire' assures that this does not mean without passion for life, with no warmth and no hope. It is therefore possible to be thankful for the little you have as well as to have hope for the future. [Discuss other points of view.]

6. REFER TO STANZA 6.

What is the main point of the message in this last stanza? Explain your answer.

The main point is to tell fellow Africans not to be afraid but to remain hopeful as things do get better over time [Consider other interpretations.] This point follows the poet's argument that if God ('the unseen') has reasons (a 'surprise') for what happens in life, there should be no reason to worry. There will be good stories and sad stories ('The ocean is full of songs.') and the gods, mystical beings or ancestors (in 'The sky') are not against them. The poet ends with 'Destiny is our friend.' Suggesting that the future is something to look forward to.

7. Now that you have studied the poem carefully, comment on the poet's choice of title.
If you think of this poem as the poet's way of expressing his personal loss and admiration for Africa, it does fulfil the function of an elegy: to

praise and express sorrow for loss. When writing an elegy, a poet will often find some consolation in the contemplation of some permanent principle. In this poem, Okri sees hope in the mystery of the indomitable African spirit. It is therefore an appropriate title and especially relevant at a time when we need as much positive affirmation as possible for those who live on this beautiful continent. [Some might see the title as ironic in that the poet seems to be communicating the opposite of what one would expect from an elegy.]

ABOUT BEN OKRI

Ben Okri OBE FRSL (born 15 March 1959) is a Nigerian poet and novelist. Okri is considered one of the foremost African authors in the post-modern and post-colonial traditions and has been compared favorably with authors such as Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez.

Ben Okri is a member of the Urhobo people; his father was Urhobo, and his mother was half-Igbo. He was born in Minna in west central Nigeria to Grace and Silver Okri in 1959. His father, Silver, moved his family to London when Okri was less than two years old so that Silver could study law. Okri thus spent his earliest years in London, and attended primary school in Peckham. In 1968 Silver moved his family back to Nigeria where he practiced law in Lagos, providing free or discounted services for those who could not afford it. His exposure to the Nigerian civil war and a culture in which his peers saw visions of spirits at this time later provided inspiration for Okri's fiction.

At the age of 14, after being rejected for admission to a university program in physics because of his youth, Okri claimed to have had a revelation that poetry was his chosen calling. He began writing articles on social and political issues, but these never found a publisher. He then wrote short stories based on those articles, and some were published in women's journals and evening papers. Okri claimed that his criticism of the government in some of this early work led to his name being placed on a death list, and necessitated his departure from the country. In the late 1970s, Okri moved back to England to study comparative literature at Essex University with a grant from the Nigerian government. But when funding for his scholarship fell through, Okri found himself homeless, sometimes living in parks and sometimes with friends. He describes this period as "very, very important" to his work: "I wrote and wrote in that period... If anything [the desire to write] actually intensified."

Okri's success as a writer began when he published his first novel *Flowers and Shadows*, at the age of 21. Okri then served *West Africa Magazine* as poetry editor from 1983 to 1986, and was a regular contributor to the BBC World Service between 1983 and 1985, continuing to publish throughout this period. His reputation as an author was secured when he won the Booker Prize for Fiction for his novel *The Famished Road* in 1991.

Since he published his first novel, *Flowers and Shadows* (1980), Okri has risen to international acclaim, and he is often described as one of Africa's leading writers. His best known work, *The Famished Road*, which was awarded the 1991 Booker Prize, along with *Songs of Enchantment* and *Infinite Riches* make up a trilogy that

follows the life of Azaro, a spirit-child narrator, through the social and political turmoil of an African nation reminiscent of Okri's remembrance of war-torn Nigeria.

Okri's work is particularly difficult to categorise. Although it has been widely categorised as post-modern, some scholars have noted that the seeming realism with which he depicts the spirit-world challenges this categorisation. If Okri does attribute reality to a spiritual world, it is claimed, then his "allegiances are not postmodern [because] he still believes that there is something ahistorical or transcendental conferring legitimacy on some, and not other, truth-claims." Alternative characterisations of Okri's work suggest an allegiance to Yoruba folklore, New Ageism, spiritual realism, magical realism, visionary materialism, and existentialism.

Against these analyses, Okri has always rejected the categorisation of his work as magical realism, claiming that this categorisation is the result of laziness on the part of critics and likening this categorisation to the observation that "a horse ... has four legs and a tale. That doesn't describe it." He has instead described his fiction as obeying a kind of "dream logic," and stated that his fiction is often preoccupied with the "philosophical conundrum ... what is reality?" insisting that:

"I grew up in a tradition where there are simply more dimensions to reality: legends and myths and ancestors and spirits and death ... Which brings the question: what is reality? Everyone's reality is different. For different perceptions of reality we need a different language. We like to think that the world is rational and precise and exactly how we see it, but something erupts in our reality which makes us sense that there's more to the fabric of life. I'm fascinated by the mysterious element that runs through our lives. Everyone is looking out of the world through their emotion and history. Nobody has an absolute reality."

Having grown up, and experienced lifetime in Africa first-hand, Ben Okri gives his reader a glimpse at the beauty of optimism and lifetime in the vast culture, in his poem "*An African Elegy*". Okri wrote this piece in the early 1990's, as a reflection of his experiences that occurred during his childhood in Africa. One could affirm that he is also using his experiences to pull inspiration and admiration outside of the reader, contradictory to the circumstance that the topic is usually one that is pitied.