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| **GRADE 12 ENGLISH HL****POETRY NOTES: PRAYER TO MASKS LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR** **Notes Presented by Ms J.Govender 19 April 2025** |

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| **PRAYER TO MASKS –** **LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR**  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!
5. And you too, my lionheaded ancestor.
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.
8. Masks of maskless faces, free from dimples and wrinkles.
9. You have composed this image, this my face that bends over the altar of white paper.
10. In the name of your image, listen to me!
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 –
13. Now fix your immobile eyes upon your children who have been called
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.
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 of 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?
19. They call us cotton heads, and coffee men, and oily men.
20. They call us men of death.

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

**Poet – LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR**

Léopold Sédar Senghor was born in Senegal in 1906. He died in 2001. He studied and lived in France for many years. He developed and was a proponent of the idea of “Negritude” – a culture that is shared by all Africans. He believed that Africans should be proud of their culture but should also incorporate the best elements of other cultures into it. He was elected as the president of Senegal in 1960. He established a multi-party state and a strong educational system. At times a controversial figure, Senghor is viewed by some as symbolic of peace between France and its colonies while others think he encapsulates neo-colonialism. He believed strongly that union between all was possible.

Senghor wrote this poem at a time when Africa was shaking off its colonial rule. The process was lengthy and difficult. In many instances there were violent protests and fights. He calls colonial rule the “Africa of despotism”, referring to the fact that African people lacked any political power.

**Diction**

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| **Word** | **Meaning** |
| Ancestor | Person from whom someone has descended |
| Feminine | Having qualities or appearance of a woman |
| Mortal | Certain to die |
| Despotism | Absolute power in a cruel way |
| Pitiable | Disserving pity |
| Immobile | Not moving |
| Garment | Item of clothing |
| Leaven | A substance, usually containing yeast, that makes bread rise  |
| Ejaculate | Say something quickly |

**Summary:**

The speaker addresses this poem to African masks – this affirms the element of African culture. The poem celebrates the role of African people and outlines the speaker’s belief that is it Africans who will ‘return the memory of life to men with a torn hope”. The speaker prays for a saviour in the community to help them face their struggles. The poem describes the relationship between Africa and Europe – it states that Africa does not need to conform to European ideals. He contemplates the consequences of colonialism. However, he ends the poem with an optimistic message: despite hardships and prejudice, the African people are strong and capable. They will be able to create new beauty and prosperity

**Form/Structure:**

The poem is structured with no breaks for stanzas. The line lengths are varied. The short sentences emphasise the speaker’s intent. The speaker, at first, addresses the masks and then expands the message of the poem. The (rhetorical) questions are answered by the speaker at the end of the poem. The direct speech allows the reader to “eavesdrop” on the conversation the speaker is having with the masks. The speaker uses the 1st person pronoun “you” to engage the reader.

**Analysis**

**THE TITLE** *prayer* – appeal to a higher power / ancestors – positive connotation. *masks* – traditional masks as worn in African culture / to hide real emotions / hide true intentions.

The title implies a ‘thank you’ to those who have been wearing the masks and to the masks themselves for being able to hide true feelings.

In “Prayer to Masks”, the carved masks collectively represent the culture of the Fathers: “You distil this air of eternity in which I breathe the air of my Fathers”. The living is connected to the past by the masks. It is these masks and the glorious culture that represent the poet’s appeals in the face of colonialism and the death of contemporary Africa and Europe.

**LINE 1**

*Masks! Oh Masks!*

The poem begins with an "apostrophe," an address to an object or spirit. Here, as the title indicates, this address is a prayer to the masks, which appear in the poem both as works of African art and as more general spirits of African culture, society, and history.

**LINE 2**

*Black mask, red mask, you black and white masks,*

Senghor pays homage to the spirits for their eternal greatness. He allows each one their due respect by acknowledging the colour of their masks, including the colours of black, red and white. The masks are prominently displayed at this place of worship.

The poem begins by speaking of masks of different colours and implying how one can hide their true self behind them. The use of masks is a strong symbol of colour and cultural identity, due to the connection of masks to African culture. The poet’s use of colours, such as black and white, carries a racial connotation that can be associated with the slave trade and oppression.

Senghor believes "masks of the four cardinal points where the Spirit blows" have a forceful presence that protects all corners of the world. These spirits come together at this sacred place to be honoured and praised in silent prayer.

**LINE 3**

*Rectangular masks through whom the spirit breathes,*

*Spirit* – reference to ancestors. The poet communicates with the spirits of his ancestors through the mask. In African culture, the wearer of the mask is often believed to be able to communicate with the being symbolised by it, or to be possessed by who or what the mask represents.

*breathes* – the ancestors are alive in the spiritual world.

Senghor suggests that these masks are also spirits of nature, linked to the winds that blow from the four directions of north, south, east, and west. As spirits that blow, they also imply that the masks are related to the poet's breath and poetic inspiration.

**LINE 4**

*I greet you in silence!*

*I –* uses the first person. This makes it personal, intimate and sincere.

*greet you in silence!* – there is no need to use words, a slight gesture will suffice. The speaker is familiar with the ancestor. They have communicated before.

*!* – emphasises the absolute silence.

**LINE 5**

*And you too, my lionheaded ancestor.*

*Lionheaded* – This refers to a traditional African mask in the shape of a lion’s head. It could also be symbolic of strength, boldness and bravery. The Senegalese national anthem is also entitled “The Red Lion”. Also praising the strength, boldness and bravery of the ancestor.

Senghor introduces his family’s guardian animal, the lion. His father’s name was Diogoye which means lion. The family is represented by a lion mask.

**LINE 6**

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

This place – refers to the after life

*is closed to any feminine laughter* – women are not allowed there. *to any mortal smile* – the living cannot enter the world of the ancestors.

The ancestor with the lion head is called upon to maintain an aura of peace at the altar while Senghor prays. He reinforces patriarchal power: the lion guards the ground that is forbidden to women and to passing things, in favour of values, memories, and customs that stretch back into mythic antiquity.

**LINE 7**

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

*Fathers* - ancestors

Senghor acknowledged the impact of the ancestors of the Senegalese people, and how their hardships and oppression have affected current day culture and life.

**LINE 8**

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

*free from dimples and wrinkles* – free from impurities, free of worries and troubles

*maskless faces* – the masks are idealised representations of previously living faces. The masks eliminate the mobile features and signs of age in the faces of the living ancestors, but in doing so outlive their death.

**LINE 9**

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

*altar* – is usually associated a church; a place of worship. This implies that something that is being revered or worshipped.

*white paper* – Figuratively, refers to laws made by the government and all the paperwork involved in creating laws or setting up political alliances.

Literally refers to a page. The ancestors are able to give shape to the face of the poet bent over the page and writing his prayer to the masks.

**LINE 10**

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

*listen to me!* – pleading tone conveys desperation. He appeals to them to listen to him, for he is the living image of those masks to whom he is writing a prayer.

**LINES 11-12**

*Now while the Africa of despotism is dying – it is the agony of a pitiable princess, Like that of Europe to whom she is connected through the navel –*

These lines contrast the glorious past of Africa, when vast black-ruled empires spanned the continent, and the present, in which the peoples of Africa have been subjugated by the imperial conquests of European nations.

*despotism is dying* – colonial rule is coming to an end. Some countries had already gained their freedom.

*pitiable princess* – someone who has been spoilt. Conveys the idea that the European countries were forced to grant independence to their colonies.

*pitiable princess* also symbolizes the nobility of traditional Africa, and her death represents both the general suffering and decline of traditional African culture and the loss of political power of blacks to rule themselves.

*connected through the navel* – This image reminds the reader of the connection of Africa to Europe, much like a baby is connected to its mother via the umbilical cord – nourishment, blood flow etc. The colonial powers in Europe were referred to as the ‘mother country’. However, they did not act like a mother should: there was mass exploitation of people, resources and land. Greed and corruption by the colonisers left Africa damaged. The severing of the connection is necessary but difficult. Colonisers would not want to sever this connection – then they lose their wealth/resources/land/labour force etc.

**LINE 13**

*Now fix your immobile eyes upon your children who have been called immobile* eyes – the eyes on the masks cannot move.

*Who have been called* – refers to the next generation that has to fight for their freedom. Implies that the fight for their freedom has been a very long one.

The masks are called to witness the sad history of modern Africa, and they look on, god-like with their changeless faces. Yet Senghor also suggests that the traditional customs and values have apparently not been able to respond to the great changes that history has brought about.

The poem implicitly comes to a question and a turning point: do the masks represent a valuable long view from which the present can be seen in its proper perspective, or are they merely relics of a past that have nothing to say to those who are exploited and suffering in the present?

**LINE 14**

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

 The simile compares those who fought for their freedom to a poor person who gives up his last garment. This implies that they gave everything that they had in order to gain their freedom.

**LINE 15**

*So that hereafter we may cry ‘here’ at the rebirth of the world being the leaven that the white flour needs.*

Personification –the colonisers have left. They no longer have any power over the country which now has the chance to be reborn, to start afresh. It can now create its own government, rules and direction for its future. *leaven* – yeast is necessary for bread to rise as it is being baked. It can therefore symbolically make this new country ‘rise’ up and be strong.

The poet prays to the magic spirits of the masks to help speed the rebirth suggested by the image of the umbilical cord connecting Africa to Europe in line 12. Reviving the ancestral spirits of the masks will help sever the ties of dependence. In turn, a reborn African creativity can help Europe to a more life-affirming use of its material and scientific wealth, just as the brown yeast is necessary for making bread from white flour.

**LINE 16**

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

*world that has died* – the end of colonialism; the old reality is now dead.

*machines and cannons* – industry and warfare. Our over-reliance on technology and machinery has caused the spiritual soul to wither and die. The world has lost its ability to feel deeply and give expression to joy. Warfare has also contributed to the destruction of the world.

Black people are the fruits of life and are needed in order to breathe life back into a world that has *died of machines and cannons.*

**LINE 17**

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

*Ejaculate* – To cry out / shout *new dawn* – refers to a new day: a new phase in their lives. A reborn Africa will lend its youthful energy to a senile Europe, bringing joy and hope where there has been isolation, exhaustion, despair, and death.

The rhetorical question conveys doubt, but it also suggests that the reader will be part of the new era. It is like a challenge to the citizens of the country, to come forward and to co-operate in this new phase, under a new political dispensation. Africa will provide the life-impulse to a Europe that is oriented toward mechanical values, materialist gain, and war.

**LINE 18**

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

*who else* – referring to the youth; hope lies with them.

There is still hope. ‘*torn hope’* suggests that there has been damage, destruction, violence but there is still some small element of optimism.

**LINE 19**

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

*they* – the colonists

The theme of oppression in this poem is further supported by Senghor’s referencing of stereotypical, prejudice and racist comments and terms black people are often labelled with, such as “cotton heads” and “coffee men”, according to their physical trades. Lack of identity creates an impersonal tone.

**LINES 20-21**

*They call us men of death.*

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

*They call us men of death –* the Europeans, view the black African as a fearful image of death.

These lines are emphatic and strongly connected to the earth. The people are involved in a traditional dance and they appear strong and resilient. This dance symbolises their new-found freedom and how they will regain their identity and take pride in their culture. They will share this culture and pride with the rest of the world.

Senghor writes with tones hope for a brighter future in which black people, the Senegalese in particular, can be recognise for their beauty and value as human beings. Their future will have a different, creative relation to the soil and the natural world. Like the participants in a traditional ceremony in which masks are used, these new Africans absorb the powers of the natural spirits through the rhythm of dance, music, and poetry.

**Tone :**

* hopeful
* meditative

**Mood**

* praise
* respect
* reverent

**Themes:**

* The oppression and discrimination of the black people.
* Role of the Ancestors
* Honouring our ancestors
* The desire for freedom
* New beginnings
* Africans can adapt to the westernized world after the Post Colonialism of France while trying to understand and continue their African traditions.

**Question 1: Essay**

*In the poem ‘****Prayer to Masks’****, the speaker addresses the masks before moving on to expand the message of the poem.*

Give a brief account of the way the speaker addresses the masks and how the message of the poem is highlighted. Your response should take the form of a well-constructed essay of 250–300 words (about ONE page).

 **TOTAL :10 Marks**

 **Suggested Answer for Question 1: Essay**

The following are points that could be included in in your essay:

Use the following points, among others, as a guideline to answering this question.

* In the poem “Prayer to Masks”, the poet appeals to his ancestors for guidance and inspiration in re-establishing African culture and proud traditions after a lengthy period of colonisation by European powers. The speaker addresses the masks directly as they represent the ancestors.
* Rather than reject African history and mix with Western culture, the speaker yearns for the past in finding his ancestral connection through the masks.
* The narrator addresses the spirits of the dead directly, keeping their memories alive and emphasising that honouring the past is crucial and beneficial as it connects them to their ancestors.
* The speaker greets the ancestors with silence which shows his deep respect and admiration towards them.
* The speaker then refers to his family's guardian animal, the lion, which is a symbol of power and courage.
* Senghor reinforces the implications of male domination in African society in which the lion guards the ground that is forbidden to women as being a part of African culture.
* The speaker refers to the glorious past of Africa, countries were ruled with pride by Africans. This has now changed due to the invasion of the European countries who colonised large parts of Africa and conquered and oppressed African people. The image of Africa compared to a princesssymbolises the nobility of traditional Africa, and her death represents decline of traditional African culture and the loss of political power of blacks to rule themselves.
* The image of the umbilical cord suggests that the European conquest has nourished a new Africa soon to be born, but one that will eventually have to sever its ties with its European "mother" if it is to live and grow.
* The poet prays to the magic spirits of the masks to help speed the rebirth suggested by the image of the umbilical cord connecting Africa to Europe.
* It is the rhythm of African music and dance that can change the thud of machines into something better. A reborn Africa will lend its youthful energy to an ageing Europe, bringing joy and hope where there has been isolation, exhaustion, despair, and death.
* Senghor refers to the exploitation of Africa for its raw materials and to European conceptions of black Africans as merely a source of cheap labour and economic profit.

 The poem ends on a note of optimism. Africans will gain their freedom and be able to express themselves freely through song and dance which is close to their hearts

**Questions and Answers**

1. Briefly explain the connotations of the words “Prayer” and “masks” as used in the title. (3) *(prayers – appeal to a higher power / ancestors – positive connotation. ‘masks’ – traditional masks as worn in African culture / to hide real emotions / hide true intentions. The title implies a ‘thank you’ to those who have been wearing the masks and to the masks themselves for being able to hide true feelings.)*
2. Why does the speaker greet the masks “in silence”? (2)

*(Words are unnecessary in this instance – a slight gesture will suffice.)*

1. Why does the speaker use the first person “I”? (2)

*(It adds a personal, intimate and sincere element to the poem. It is subjective.)*

1. How could an ancestor be “lion headed” (line 4)? (2)

*(This could refer to a traditional African mask in the shape of a lion’s dead. It could also be symbolic of strength, boldness and bravery. The Senegalese national anthem is also entitled “The Red Lion”.)*

1. Discuss the choice in diction in metaphor “altar of white paper” (line 8). (3)

*(white paper could refer to bureaucracy – it takes an immense amount of paperwork to create laws / set up political alliances etc. The ‘altar’ suggests that something is being worshipped/praised.)*

1. Identify the tone in “In the name of your image, listen to me!” (1)

*(A pleading, desperate tone. Or a respectful command filled with authority.)*

1. What does the speaker mean when he states that Europe and Africa are “connected through the navel”? *(This image reminds the reader of the connection of Africa to Europe, much like a baby is connected to its mother via the umbilical cord – nourishment, blood flow etc. The colonial powers in Europe were referred to as the ‘mother country’. However, this connection is a negative one – Europe colonised many countries in Africa. There was mass exploitation of people, resources and land. Greed and corruption by the colonisers left Africa damaged. The severing of the connection is necessary but difficult. Colonisers would not want to sever this connection – then they lose their wealth/resources/land/labour force etc.)*
2. Identify the figure of speech and explain the effectiveness thereof in the phrase “rebirth of the world” (line 14). (3)

*(Personification – now that the colonisers have left / have no more power over the country, it has the chance to be reborn, to start afresh. It can now create its own government / future.)*

1. How has the world “died of machines and cannons”? (2)

*(Our over-reliance on technology and machinery has caused the spiritual soul to wither and die. The world has lost its ability to feel deeply and give expression to joy.)*

1. Is there any optimism in this poem? Quote in support of your answer. (2)

*(“world that has died” – shows that the old reality is gone/dead. There is a semblance of hope (“torn hope”) despite the damage, destruction and violence.)*

 11.Discuss the effectiveness of the last two lines of the poem as a conclusion. (3)

 *(These lines are emphatic and strongly connected to the earth. The people are involved in a traditional dance and they appear strong and resilient. This dance symbolises their new-found freedom and how they will regain their identity and take pride in their culture. They will share this culture and pride with the rest of the world.)*