

The image features five traditional African wooden masks arranged vertically. From left to right: the first mask has a long, slender face with a large, stylized feather or leaf-like carving on the forehead; the second mask has a diamond-shaped grid pattern on the forehead and large, circular eyes; the third mask has a long, pointed nose and a wide, open mouth; the fourth mask has a long, straight nose and a wide, open mouth with red lips; and the fifth mask has a long, pointed nose and a wide, open mouth with red lips. The masks are made of dark wood and feature various carvings and painted details in white and red. The background is dark and textured.

Prayer to Masks

Leopold Senghor

Poem

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!

Poem

- 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



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 it is 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



Themes

- ❖ The oppression and discrimination of black people.
- ❖ Role of the Ancestors
- ❖ Honouring the 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.

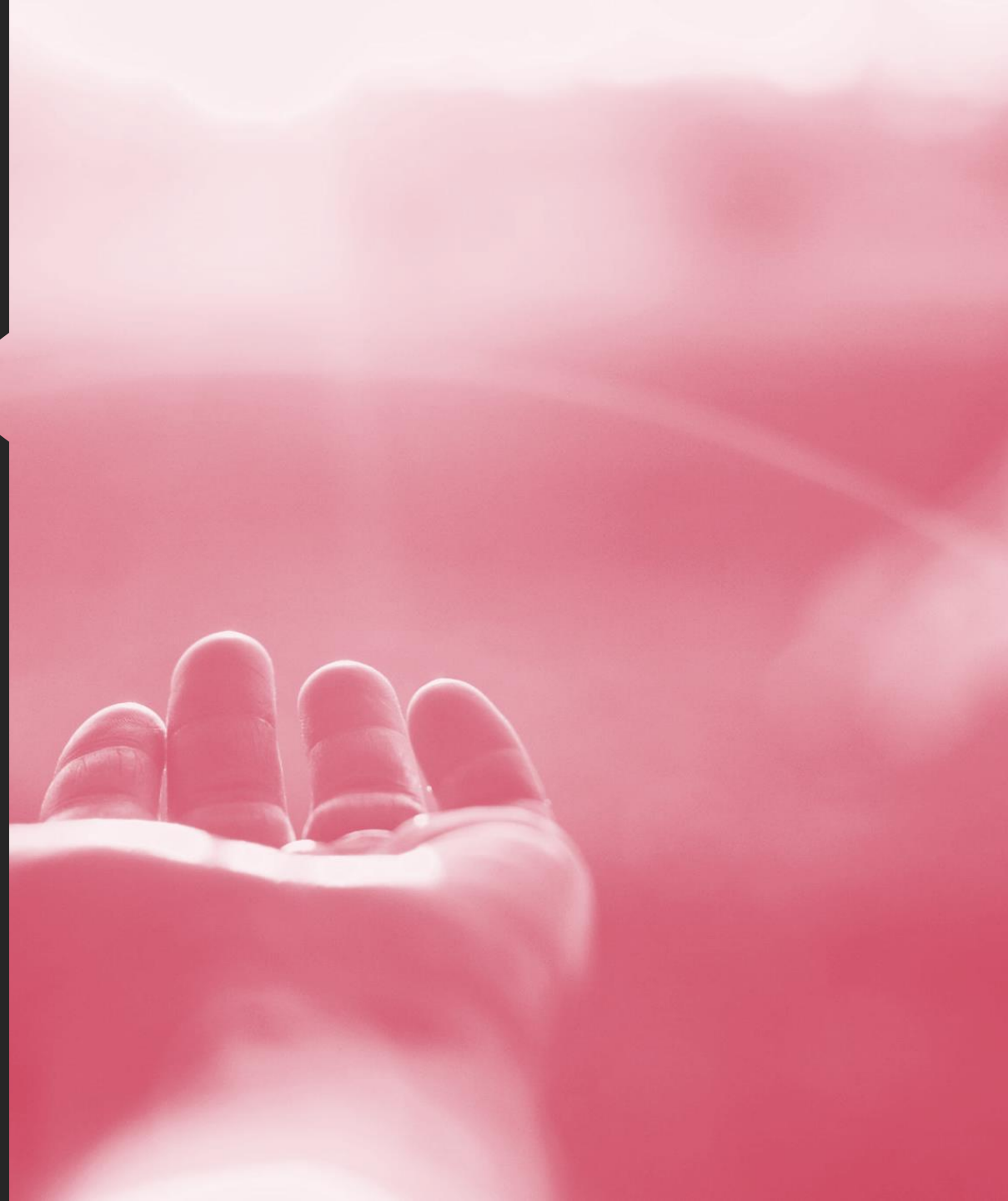
Tone & Mood

Tone:

- hopeful
- meditative

Mood:

- praise
- respect
- reverent



Lines 1-2

Apostrophe
Addressed to masks – these are both art and the ancestors

Masks! Oh Masks!

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

The speaker shows respect to each one individually. The different colours represent different parts of culture and humanity.



Lines 3-4

Reference to ancestors.

The ancestors are alive in the spiritual world.

Rectangular masks through whom the spirit breathes,

I greet you in silence!

This makes it personal,
intimate and sincere

There is no need to use
words, a slight gesture
will suffice.

Prayer doesn't require
being spoken out loud.

Lines 5-6

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's family's guardian animal is the lion. His father's name was Diogoye which means lion. The family is represented by a lion mask.

And you too, my lionheaded ancestor.

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

the after life

no women allowed

no living men allowed

Re-enforces culture and patriarchy

Lines 7-8

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.

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

Masks of maskless faces, free from dimples and wrinkles.

free from impurities, free
of worries and troubles

the masks are idealised representations of previously living faces. The masks outlive death.

Lines 9-10

The speaker acknowledges the influence of the ancestors in his life

'altar' - This implies that something that is being revered or worshipped.

*You have composed this image, this my face that bends over the altar of white paper.
In the name of your image, listen to me!*

pleading tone conveys desperation.

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.

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

Lines 11-12

Colonial rule is coming to an end.

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

*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** –*

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

Alliteration – harsh 'P' sound

Lines 13-14

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.

Can the past actually help or are the 'Ancestors' powerless in a modern age?

*Now fix your immobile eyes upon your children who have been called
And who sacrifice their lives **like** the poor man his last garment*

Simile

They gave everything they had to fight for freedom

Lines 15-16

Leaven – yeast:
symbolises growth

Reviving the ancestral spirits
of the masks will help sever
the ties of dependence.

the country now has the
chance to be reborn

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

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

Industry and warfare

The world has lost its
ability to feel deeply and
give expression to joy

the end of colonialism; the
old reality is now dead

a reborn African creativity can
help Europe, just as the brown
yeast is necessary for making
bread from white flour.

Lines 17-18

To cry out / shout *new dawn*

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.

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

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

referring to the youth and current citizens; 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.

Lines 19-20

Colonists

The theme of oppression referencing of stereotypical, prejudice and racist comments. Lack of identity creates an impersonal tone.

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

They call us men of death.

Europeans, view the black African as a fearful image of death

Line 21

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

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.

Shows a difficult life based on resilience.

Their future will have a different, creative relation to the soil and the natural world.

Discussion Point

- Can hope fix a broken past?