

**PROFILE OF
NOBEL LAUREATE WOLE SOYINKA**

“Books and all forms of writing have always been objects of terror to those who seek to suppress the truth.”

-Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died: The Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*.

Wole Soyinka's life is one of the rare, riveting biographies of our time. His life course has brought him from death's door as a political prisoner in solitary confinement to the hallowed halls of Harvard, Yale, and Leeds. Soyinka seems fated to bridge elements in our world which are poles apart. His vision is described variously as, “inspirational,” “transcendent,” and “demanding but rewarding.” As a play write, poet, and novelist Soyinka's vision comes to us through a stunning corpus.

The Emory University Trustees Executive Committee whole heartedly affirmed the appointment of Nobel Laureate Soyinka to the position of Robert W. Woodruff Professor of the Arts, put forth by their President William Chase, in September 1996. Soyinka who has held positions at Yale, Cornell, Cambridge and Harvard, is acknowledged as one of the great dramatic imaginations of the 20th Century.

Many critics consider Soyinka Africa's finest writer. His unique style blends traditional Yoruban Folk Drama with European dramatic form. His corpus itself is one of the premier chronicles of Africa's political turmoil and its struggle to reconcile tradition with modernization. Soyinka warns against excesses in either African impulse. In *Dance of the Forests* he warns against living in nostalgia for Africa's past, and followed that work with *The Lion and the Jewel* in which he lampoons Africa's indiscriminate embrace of Western modernization. His wide-ranging wit takes in all sections of a corrupt society — the brutal masses, aimless intellectuals, the affected and hypocritical university dons, the vulgar, corrupt businessmen, the mediocre civil servants, the illiterate politicians, and the incompetent journalists.

Soyinka's passion for the written word is nowhere more poignantly revealed than by his actions during his political imprisonment. He was denied reading and writing materials, but he manufactured his own ink and began to keep a prison diary, written on toilet paper, cigarette packages and in between the lines of the few books he secretly obtained. Each poem or fragment from the journal he managed to smuggle to the outside world became a literary event and a reassurance to his supporters that Soyinka still lived.

Playwright, poet, essayist, critic, activist, Nobel Laureate

- In 1986, Wole Soyinka won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was the 1st African to win the Prize for Literature. (Another African, Desmond Tutu, won his Nobel Peace Prize two years earlier in 1984).
- Soyinka received his Nobel Prize for Literature from Sweden's King Carl Gustaf on December 6, 1986. In his Nobel lecture on December 8, Soyinka stated: "And of those imperatives that challenge our being, our presence, and humane definition at this time, none can be considered more pervasive than the end of racism, the eradication of human inequality, and the dismantling of all their structures. The Prize is the consequent enthronement of its complement: universal suffrage and peace."
- Wole Soyinka left Harvard to become the Robert W. Woodruff Professor of the Arts at Emory in 1996 (a position earlier held by South African Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, 1991-1992 and again in 1997). He is in the Program of African American Studies where he teaches, collaborates with Theater Emory on artistic productions, and collaborate with programs on creative writing, liberal arts, philosophy, art history, political science and religion.

A Biographical Profile of Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka

July 13, 1934 - Wole Soyinka was born in Abeokuta, Western Nigeria. His family lived in the Aké quarter of the city. Nigeria was still a British colony. Soyinka's father was Headmaster at an Anglican Primary School; his mother — nicknamed the "Wild Christian" — was a primary school teacher.

1952-54 - Soyinka studied Greek, English and History at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, an institution affiliated with the University of London.

1957 - Soyinka attended the University of Leeds in England, where he earned a Bachelor degree in English Literature with Honour's.

1958 - *The Swamp Dwellers* is produced by Soyinka for the University of London Drama Festival.

1959 - *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Lion and the Jewel* are produced by Soyinka in Ibadan. In November he wrote, produced and acted in *An Evening without Decor*, a medley of his works, at the Royal Court Theatre in London. These works attack racism and colonial repression in Africa.

1960-62 - As a Rockefeller Fellow, Soyinka returned to Nigeria to study West African drama at the University of Ibadan. He wrote the essay entitled, "Towards a True Theatre."

1961 - Soyinka wrote several radio plays which eventually led to the Nigeria government censoring his efforts.

1962-63 - Lecturer in English Department at the University of Ife.

1964 - With others, founded the Drama Association of Nigeria.

1965 - Soyinka was arrested and imprisoned. He was falsely accused of broadcasting false election results on radio. Internationally renowned writers such as Norman Mailer and William Styron led protests of Soyinka's imprisonment. Soyinka was freed after 3 months imprisonment.

Novel, *The Interpreters*, published in London. He also writes and directs, *Before the Blackout* at the Orisun Theatre; directs *Kongi's Harvest* in Lagos; and records *The Detainee* for the BBC in London.

1965-67 - A Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Lagos. Soyinka was an unrelenting critic of personality cults and the widespread emergence of dictatorships in newly independent countries in Africa.

1967 - During the Nigeria civil war in which the republic of Biafra attempted to secede, Soyinka was falsely accused of supporting the rebels. He was arrested, but never charged, and spent 27 months in prison (1967-1969). He was placed in solitary confinement in a cell that was 4x8 feet.

-While in prison, Soyinka survived by writing. He secretly composed on toilet paper, discarded cigarette packages, between the lines of books he surreptitiously acquired. These disparate writings became his 1972, *The Man Died: The Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*.

-Soyinka wrote in *The Man Died: The Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka*, that "Books and all forms of writing have always been objects of terror to all those who seek to suppress the truth."

-Gerald Weeks of the *New York Times* wrote that "the real subject matter of the book [is] the author's attempt to survive as a man, as a mind."

-Writing in prison was vital for Soyinka's survival: "That saved my sanity, just to be able to scribble some things from time to time. And I think that would be true of most writers."

Oct. 1969 - Upon release from prison, Soyinka returned to the University of Ibadan to become Chair of the Department of Theatre Arts. He wrote, "The Writer in a Modern African

State.”

Within a year he went into voluntary exile and spent the next five years (1970-1975) in Europe. During this time, he edited Africa's leading intellectual journal, *Transition*.

1969 - *The Road* produced by Theatre Limited in Kampala, Uganda; Soyinka published, *Poems from Prison*.

1970 - *Madmen and Specialists* was completed and directed with the Ibadan University Theatre Arts in New Haven, Connecticut and in Harlem.

1971 - A collection of poems, *A Shuttle in the Crypt* is published. Soyinka acts the role of Patrice Lumumba in John Littlewood's French production of Conor Cruise O'Brien's *Murderous Angels* (Paris). He also testified in defense of students' rights at the Kazeem Enquiry.

1972 - Soyinka published his prison notes, *The Man Died*. It was banned in Nigeria in 1984.

1972 - Soyinka published expanded version of *The Man Died* as *A Shuttle in the Crypt*.

1973 - Soyinka receives an Honorary Ph.D from the University of Leeds. He also published the novel, *Season of Anomy*; *Collected Plays I* and produced for the National Theatre, London, the commissioned play, *Bacchae of Euripides*.

1973-74 - Soyinka became an Overseas Fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge and a Visiting Professor of English at the University of Sheffield. He published *Collected Plays II*.

1975 - This year saw Soyinka return to Nigeria as a Professor of English at the University of Ife. For the next 10 years, Soyinka was a moral, intellectual and political force in Nigeria, speaking out in defense of democracy, and human rights. He was also a distinguished visiting professor at many of the world's best universities: Cambridge, Harvard, Yale, and Cornell.

The *Poems of Black Africa* was edited by Soyinka. He also wrote the essay, “Neo-Tarzanism: The Poetics of Pseudo-Tradition.” In *Transition* he criticized the dictatorship of Idi Amin.

1976 - The collection of poems, *Ogun Abibiman* was published, as well as the book, *Myth, Literature, and the African World*. Soyinka was also a Visiting Professor at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon. In Kenya, the Nairobi High School production of *A Dance of the Forests* and in Dakar, Gambia, the French production of the same play. *Death and the King's Horseman* was produced in Ife. This dramatic work has been characterized as a masterpiece on the order of *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*.

1978 - Soyinka wrote the essay, “Language as Boundary.”

- 1981- In this year Soyinka published *Aké*. Soyinka describes the book about his childhood biography as “the intellectual watering-hole of *Aké* and its environs.” According to Soyinka, “This was a period of anti-colonial fervor, so the entire anti-colonial training was something I imbibed quite early, even before the women’s movement.” This has been widely acclaimed as a classic. James Olney wrote in the *New York Times* that *Aké* was “a classic of childhood memoirs wherever and whenever produced.” Soyinka also wrote the essay, “The Critic and Society: Barthes, Leftocracy, and Other Mythologies.”
- 1982 - The film, *Blues for the Prodigal* was released. Soyinka wrote the essay, “Cross Currents: The ‘New African’ after Cultural Encounters.”
- 1983 - The radio play, *Die Still, Rev. Dr. Godspoke*; and the play, *Requiem for a Futurologist* produced at the University of Ife. Soyinka wrote the essay, “Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist.”
- 1984 - *A Play of Giants*.
- 1985 - Soyinka published *Requiem for a Futurologist*. He delivered, “Climates of Art” for the Herbert Read Memorial Lecture at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London. Soyinka was named President of UNESCO’s International Theatre Institute.
- 1986 - Soyinka became the first African to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature by the Swedish Academy that described him as “one of the finest poetical playwrights that have written in English.” According to one critic, Soyinka was a writer “who, in a vast cultural perspective enriched with poetic resonances, stages a dramatic representation of existence.”
- He was also awarded Commander of the Federal Republic, CFR, Nigeria’s second highest honour. He was also a Fellow, Society for the Humanities at Cornell University; and wrote the essay, “The External Encounter: Ambivalence in African Arts and Literature.”
- Critic Stanley Meisler of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote: “His drama and fiction have challenged the West to broaden its aesthetic and accept African standards of art and literature.”
- For Soyinka, a writer yearning for the space to be creative, the Peace Prize was a mixed blessing. He observed: “A lot of people find this difficult to believe, but for me it was just another prize, only bigger and more demanding on me in terms of what you give back, because everybody wants something as a result of that prize. It has such a prestige and such a hold on people’s imagination in all corners and on all levels that you become the property of the world. I don’t regret it, don’t misunderstand me, but it is a mixed blessing.”
- 1987 - *Six Plays*; and *Childe Internationale* republished.

1989 - A short essay, "The Search," was written.

1991 - In Lagos conducted the Sisi Clara Workshop on Theatre; *A Scourage of Hyacinths*, a radio play for the BBC African Service. "The Credo of Being and Nothingness" delivered as the First Rev. Olufosoye Annual Lecture in Religion at the University of Ibadan on 25 January.

1992 - *From Zia with Love*.

1993 - Soyinka received an Honorary doctorate from Harvard University.

1994 - Soyinka publishes the autobiography, *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years (A Memoir: 1946-1965)*, and *Memoirs of a Nigerian Childhood*. He is forced to flee Nigeria in November. In September, Soyinka's passport was confiscated by Nigerian government of General Sani Abacha. Soyinka was faced with house arrest and left Nigeria, again to live in exile until the death of General Abacha.

1995 - *The Beatification of Area Boy*.

1996 - Soyinka published, *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigeria Crisis*. It is an impassioned examination of the political unrest that paralysed Nigeria for much of the 1990s under the brutal dictatorship of the late General Sani Abacha.

-*The Open Sore of a Continent* focuses on one day — June 23, 1993 — the day General Abacha annulled the democratic elections of two weeks earlier and imprisoned the elected leader, the late Chief Moshood Abiola. In *The Open Sore of a Continent*, Soyinka writes "Under a dictatorship, a nation ceases to exist". And, he continues, "All that remains is a fiefdom, a planet of slaves regimented by aliens from outer space."

-*The Open Sore of a Continent*, was named one of the 25 best books by *The Village Voice*.

-Critic Steven G. Kellerman wrote in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution that "in English prose that is at once sumptuous and blunt, Soyinka broods over the combination of avarice, venality, intolerance and cruelty that threatens the virtual collapse of civic society in Nigeria."

1997 - In March, the regime of dictator, Gen. Sani Abacha – which executed the writer and human rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, charged Soyinka with treason.

1998-99 -When things were most bleak for Nigeria, especially in the period prior to the elections of February 1999, Soyinka took hope from the end of apartheid in South Africa. He characterised this moment as follows: "It was a triumph of the human will and a triumph of racial will for black peoples all over the world. If anything, it is a challenge to Nigeria.

Compared to the gap between the self-imposed ruling caste in Nigeria and the populous, the gap between the white minority and the blacks in South Africa is a difference of several light years.”

-While Soyinka has been pressured to return to Nigeria and run for political office, he has eschewed these advances, preferring the solitude of writing. For Soyinka: “If it were a crisis which required a kind of temporary role, understood that it would be temporary, it’s possible that I might consider it.”

However, in an interview on CNN prior to the February 1999 elections in Nigeria, Soyinka reiterated his desire to write. He also expressed a scepticism about the legitimacy of the elections and the process. His views on the involvement in electoral process was noted sometime ago when in 1996 he stated that long-term political office was not his calling:

-Interim involvement in politics was possible. “But not as a regular structured thing for four or five years. You can forget that. Me, I don’t want any such prediction to come true. I just hope that we can win this battle, and I can settle down to a normal life of writing and directing and spasmodic teaching here and there. That’s what I want.”

Wole Soyinka is also the author of:

The poetry collection including, *Mandela’s Earth and Other Poems*.

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