

AN AFRICAN ELEGY - BEN OKRI

What is an elegy?

Traditionally, an elegy is a mournful poem usually written in response to death. It is a poem of serious reflection, typically a lament for the dead. It is written in three stages:

→ grief

→ sorrow

→ praise

Summary

- Okri's elegy, however, is not mournful; rather it is reflective and thoughtful.
- The poet is speaking about his African culture – 'we' and 'our' – the people of Africa.
- 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 their suffering.
- The poem laments the people but also is filled with hope as it ends.

Stanza 1

Line 1

We are the miracles that God made

miracles – He acknowledges the power of God. Respectful and spiritual tone.

We – refers to the people of African descent.

Line 2

To taste the bitter fruit of Time.

Metaphor – Our experiences in life are compared to bitter fruit. Just as we do not like bitter fruit, so too do we dislike bitter/painful experiences. God created humans so that we could face good and bad times. Death is a bitter fruit.

bitter fruit – Oxymoron - fruit are usually sweet. Life has not been sweet. They have endured pain, poverty, hardship and slavery.

Lines 3-5

We are precious

And one day our suffering

Will turn into the wonders of the earth.

Optimistic tone – message of hope. They must not despair.

They are innocent people whose suffering will one day change for something amazing (*wonders of the earth*). Their suffering will end and when it ends, those who have endured it will be strengthened and be regarded as "wonders".

Stanza 2

Lines 6-7

There are things that burn me now

Which turn golden when I am happy.

things that burn me now – Negative aspects - convey suffering/ pain/ leaves scars. He is experiencing pain and suffering at the moment (*now*)

Which turn golden – positive aspects - these rare/ memorable/ precious moments. Despite the hardships, he is able to find happiness.

Paradox – contrasting feelings.

Line 8

Do you see the mystery of our pain?

Rhetorical question conveys sarcasm. There is no mystery regarding the pain of the African people.

you – refers to those who live in luxury in developed countries. They are oblivious to the pain and suffering of the African people. They have never experienced the pain that is being alluded to here, hence it is a “mystery”.

Lines 9-10

That we bear poverty

And are able to sing and dream sweet things

sing and dream sweet things – they have hope despite all the pain and suffering. Despite the harsh living conditions, poverty and pain, they are still able to dream and sing of better things. Feeling of optimism.

Stanza 3

Lines 11-13

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?

The rhetorical questions emphasise their self-contentment.

They don't take things for granted. They cherish all the things they have. They accept what is good when it is given and enjoy the moment.

never curse the air when it is warm – they do not complain when it is hot – symbolic of negative experiences in their life.

Or the fruit when it tastes so good – it is obvious that nobody will complain about fruit that taste good. Emphasises their acceptance of the good and bad without complaints.

lights that bounce gently on the waters – lights - symbolic of hope. They are able to appreciate the simple things in life. Emphasises their contentment with the positive things they have in life.

Lines 14-15

We bless things even in our pain.

We bless them in silence.

We bless things even in our pain – contrast (bless/ pain): they remain positive even though it is difficult.

We bless them in silence – refers to silent prayers. They pray silently for what they have and hope for a better tomorrow. They do not take for granted what they are given.

Tone – appreciation. They can focus on the good in the midst of pain and poverty.

Stanza 4

Lines 16-17

That is why our music is so sweet.

It makes the air remember.

our music is so sweet – They live happily, despite their situation. Hence, their music is *sweet* – no sorrow in their music. Emphasises their self-contentment. Their music hides their suffering/pain. They are able to express themselves and their music is poignant. *It makes the air remember* – Personification – Air is given the human characteristic of remembering. They remember their past struggles, their suffering and heartache.

Lines 18-19

There are secret miracles at work

That only Time will bring forth.

secret miracles – miracles cannot be explained.

Time will bring forth – They will be revealed at the appropriate moment. They are meant to happen at a particular place, at a particular time.

Time – capitalised - Personification – the poet is emphasising that life is a journey and nobody knows when it will end.

Despite the pain of loss and suffering being experienced, time will heal all wounds and they are sure that better times will come.

Line 20

I too have heard the dead singing.

dead – refers to his ancestors, deceased family and friends.

the dead singing – personification – The dead cannot sing. By giving them life, he is implying that he has seen some of these miracles. He is acknowledging that one day he will understand the secrets/miracles of life.

I too – sense of disbelief – regards it as a miracle. The poet follows their traditional belief systems.

Stanza 5

Lines 21-24

And they tell me that

This life is good

They tell me to live it gently

With fire, and always with hope.

they – refers to his ancestors. They have given him advice: Life is good, even if he does not see the goodness. They have given the poet the way to overcome the trials of life: Live life happily despite the situations you encounter.

He is further advised to live life with passion (*fire*) and hope, even during the bad times.

There will always be something to look forward to in the future.

They give the advice from their omniscient perspective.

Line 25

There is wonder here

wonder – life is full of amazing things/miracles. We must be open to them.

In this stanza, there is a change from an elegy to a more positive type of poem that deals with life not death.

Stanza 6

Lines 26-28

*And there is surprise
In everything the unseen moves.
The ocean is full of songs.*

The shift alluded to in the previous stanza is built on in this stanza and the poem ends on a positive note.

In everything the unseen moves – He is reminding us that God has total control of our destiny. God has an overall plan for man. We are not aware of that plan; hence, we are surprised by certain events. Positive connotations to “surprise”.

ocean is full of songs – he is suggesting that there is beauty to be found in everyday occurrences and in the things, that we are oblivious to. We must take the time to notice these little miracles. The ocean is symbolic of life; songs are symbolic of our experiences.

Lines 29-30

*The sky is not an enemy.
Destiny is our friend.*

The sky – symbolic of God. We should not regard God as our enemy, someone to fight against. We are not aware of God’s plans (*destiny*).

We should not fight with God when He presents us with challenges. We should be thankful because God also provides us with the help that is necessary in order to overcome these difficulties. Therefore, He is *our friend*.

Destiny is our friend – personification – destiny is not a person. Destiny which has always been seen negatively, is now seen in a positive light and it something to look forward to. A definite change in tone.

tone

Quiet confidence / acceptance / hope / optimism

MOOD

Hopeful/ Optimistic

THEMES

Man must see himself as being precious because he was created by God.

Although one may not thoroughly understand his or her suffering in life it does not mean that one should lose hope.

Overcoming problems and difficulties of life by being positive, is rewarding – this is the African way of dealing with suffering.

There are many mysteries in life. One should appreciate life for what it has to offer.

Hope, miracles, poverty, pain, destiny, time, suffering.

QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the effectiveness of the juxtaposition in the first stanza. (3)
2. Perspective is very important in this poem, looking at stanzas two and three explain how perspective is reality? (3)
3. Why does the poet use the imagery of music in the fourth stanza, and is it effective? (3)
4. How and why does the tone change in the course of the poem? (3)
5. Identify the theme of the poem? Substantiate with reference to diction and imagery. (3)
6. Discuss how the last line of the poem conveys the central idea of the poem. (2)