

## A Discussion of Ben Okri's poem "African Elegy"

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Ben Okri was born in Nigeria. After living in London for a short while, he returned with his parents to Nigeria just before the Nigerian Civil War. After school he wanted to study science, but he was thought to be too young to attend University. Instead he read and wrote extensively and so began his writing career. He has published volumes of poetry, articles, short essays, short stories, novels and plays. He won the Booker Prize for his novel *The Famished Road*.

### "African Elegy"

The title of the poem makes a general statement about Africa, as Okri has not used the definite article. So, although Okri is Nigerian, the poem concerns all the continent of Africa. The word 'elegy' suggests an expression of mourning and sorrow and prepares the reader for the rest of the poem. Line one, however, changes the mood with the word 'miracles' and with the assertion that we are God's creation. The enjambed or run-on line, hastening the pace, alters this sense of hope because the miracles are made only to suffer bitterness and pain. The Garden of Eden neither flourishes nor sustains. Time is without end and we are in its control. The inclusive and intimate use of the pronoun 'we' offers the idea that 'our misery' is shared. Line three again offers comfort in its brief statement. The simple sentence cannot be argued and 'precious' is linked to 'miracles' in stark contrast to the 'bitter fruit'

Lines 4 and 5 are again enjambed, indicating the writer's passion with a natural stress on the first words of line 5: 'will turn'. The suffering will become the 'wonders' of the earth. The writer states that there is much that is able to 'burn' but that these difficulties will change to glory, happiness and gleam 'golden'. The word 'when' again offers certainty that suffering and instability, both general and personal will end. Okri does not destroy the possibility of hope by using the word 'If'

The rhetorical question in line 9 asserts two important ideas. Once again the pain is shared because of the possessive adjective 'our' but the scope of the question is widened as Okri includes the reader with the second person pronoun 'you'

The following 5 lines continue the anaphora of line 5-And. The use of this technique helps the reader to appreciate the urgency of the poet's description of what 'we' are able to do to avoid pain and deprivation. The lines are filled with imagery: tactile (warm) taste (the fruit) and the synesthesia of the 'lights' that have a physical presence as well as a visual one. All these images serve to explain why, despite the pain, it is possible to offer 'sweet' music.

Although the miracles are not yet obvious, as they are 'secret', there is reassurance that change is a possibility. The ancestors, 'the dead', give instructions to the living and offer the comfort of 'hope' while the advice is filled with opposing ideas. Life is to be lived 'gently' but also 'with fire' and passion – fully. Line 26 asserts that the human feeling of joy, 'wonder' is here and that it is within the grasp of all the people of Africa because miracles surround and sustain. Once again, the writer stresses the idea that those who live in Africa are part of nature, and that the natural world surrounds Africa's people all the time. The final 3 lines are short definite statements, and the simple sentences carry a note of gentle authority. The future or 'Destiny' is benevolent. The capital letter D personifies 'Destiny' – it is a reliable and just friend.