

Collated Questions

Character

- Is Ede a static or dynamic character? Does he change or grow over the course of the story? Does he *want* to change or grow? To what extent is Ede a self-aware character? Does he learn from his experiences? How is this related to the sign that the prophetess holds, reading “THE WAGES OF VANITY IS DEATH” (9)?
- What characterizes Ede’s relationship to Maria? Is this love that Okri is describing? Lust? Something else? If it is just lust, why is Ede so persistent in trying to reach her? Is it significant that Ede’s lust is never consummated, that something always gets in the way?
- Why does Ede blame Maria for his own troubles? Why does Maria continue to tolerate Ede’s bad behavior? Is the reader meant to sympathize with Ede? Is he mostly good or mostly flawed? To what extent is Ede’s attitude toward women indicative of wider societal attitudes (perhaps explaining some of his less desirable character traits)?
- What is the logic of Ede’s abrupt death at the end? How are the women in the marketplace like the Maenads of the Orpheus myth?
- Why is Maria described in such a way that she is associated with negative imagery (e.g., she looks “demonic, almost possessed” [5], “bats had matted themselves tightly to her hair” [6-7], etc.)? Is the reader supposed to feel negatively toward her? Wouldn’t it have been simpler for Maria to be more upfront about what was happening to her at the beginning? Why does she drop hints and make obscure references rather than directly ask for help?
- Why is Maria’s character fractured throughout the city? Why does she keep appearing in different guises? Is this a psychological manifestation of Ede’s guilt? What is the purpose of her last transformation on the final page of the story (in which she has characteristics of young and old, man and woman)?

Setting

- Why does Okri go to such lengths to describe the decrepitude of Lagos? Specifically, what is going on with the “dead” man on page 14 who urges revolt? Is this related to the idea that Ede expresses when he says that if “chaos is the god of an era, clamorous music is the deity’s chief instrument” (16)? Why does Maria compare Ede’s declaration of love to her to what politicians say to the people (23)?
- What in the story addresses specifically Nigerian concerns? Why is there such an emphasis on corrupt politics? Why does Maria dream that both she and Ede must die in order for them to come back to life (19)?

- What is the significance of the three-headed man that Maria describes (21)? Was Maria bitten by a snake as her uncle suggests?

Themes

- There are many contrasts between darkness and light in the story. What is the purpose of the juxtaposition? What do these concepts connote? Why do the lights returning rejuvenate the people, yet at the same time herald Maria and Ede's death? What about candlelight and human sweat (two other common motifs)?
- Both at the beginning (5) and near the end (19) Maria makes a prophecy about things that ultimately come true (that Ede would have to rescue her from death and that Ede would be stoned to death in the marketplace). Do these represent possibilities, or is Okri suggesting that our actions are not truly free?
- Why are the black-outs connected with Maria's sickness? What is the purpose of the black-outs (in general)? Why is Maria so afraid of them? The woman in the marketplace connects the black-outs to conspiracy theories about a corrupt government and the military (13-14). Why does Okri include these ideas?
- What explains the continual failures in Ede's singing: the aborted concert (1), the protest that he cannot sing until the lights return (6), and the moment in the marketplace when Ede sings of the world around him but stops short when Maria compares him to Orpheus (22)?
- What is the significance of the title? How are we supposed to make sense of the ending paragraph:

Deep in the marketplace, amid all the cacophony, a woman sang in a voice of agonized sweetness. In Ede's street the electric bulbs swayed in the breeze. The dogs barked at the dust. The wind sighed over the rooftops. Neighbours were quiet, and couples had made up their quarrels. Ede's mother stayed up that night, listening to the frogs croaking all over the marshland (27).

Author's Craft

- To what extent is the hallucinogenic imagery meant to be taken seriously as fact? Are these dreams or reality that Ede is experiencing? Why do ordinary people cycle back and forth between normal and demonic versions of themselves?
- Why does the author depict black cats, describe characters with dreams of death, record prophetic statements, etc.?