

Ato Quayson, John Kerrigan, and Richard Halpern on Postcolon...

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SPEAKERS

Ato Quayson, Casey Wayne Patterson, Richard Halpern, Margaret Cohen, John Kerrigan



Casey Wayne Patterson 00:05

Welcome, and thanks for joining us in this episode of Cafe, the Stanford Center for the Study of the Novel podcast. In this installment, our host Margaret Cohen is joined by guests Ato Quayson, Richard Halpern, and John Kerrigan to discuss the place of tragedy in postcolonial literature. Ato Quayson is a Professor of English at Stanford University. Richard Halpern, recently retired, was Erich Maria Remarque Professor of literature at NYU, and John Kerrigan is a Professor of literature at St. John's College, Cambridge. This conversation was recorded on November 15, 2019, shortly before our guests gave papers and a panel on the same topic, hosted by the Stanford Center for the Study of the Novel. The interview begins with an anecdote from Ato, then Richard's response. Margaret joins the conversation next, then John. We're thrilled to be sharing this conversation with you. So thank you, again, for listening in as we scholars have a friendly chat among ourselves.



Ato Quayson 01:19

Well, I have to start with an anecdote of how I got to tragedy. And it's at university, I had a teacher that, a professor that inspired me greatly, and he was noted for a characteristic--which I didn't quite share in terms of opinions--he was extremely lazy. He hated grading papers, so he never did. So if you give him your paper during the semester, there will be no sign of it. But to me, he had the mind of God. He introduced us to the history and theory of

literary criticism. He also taught a paper on Shakespeare, and he was the one who introduced me, or us, to Aristotle, the Poetics, you know, very systematic. And he used to speak very slowly. He was a very slow speaker, but also a slow reader. He read slowly, and he spoke really slowly. And he was very concerned that we understood that all literary criticism was about method. And what better way to introduce us to method than through Aristotle? So that ignited my, my interest. But at the time, my, our, range of knowledge of tragedies was actually limited to Shakespeare. And a couple of the Greek tragedies, actually, mainly Sophocles. I was so taken with Mr. Denkabe, he was called, that I discovered through the grapevine that he had actually gone to Cambridge, to St. John's College. So that also ignited my interest in learning more about Aristotle, but also going to Cambridge. But, more importantly, the essay that submitted for my graduate studies, was an application of Aristotle to Achebe's Things Fall Apart. And I have always--I've looked for the paper many times, I can't find it. So when I came to understand the tragedy more fully or more elaborately, I never managed to completely separate myself from the Aristotelian scaffolding. So the book that I'm writing is [...] anyone that knows about Aristotle will see that it's essentially draped over an Aristotelian scaffolding, and it was that undergraduate professor who ignited the interest in me.

R

Richard Halpern 04:07

I, as well am entangled in that Aristotelian scaffolding and happily so. For me, tragedy is about human action, and it's about the consequentiality of human action, and the coherence and intelligibility of human action. And it does that by depicting human actions that go awry, that go badly for some reason, and the degree of catastrophe produced by a particular action is a kind of register, in a weird way, of the significance of that action. So in essence, I don't have an original theory of tragedy. I adhere largely to Aristotle's, though I'm also impressed by Hegel's reading of tragedy as showing two ethical systems in conflict with each other. But I think Aristotle's is better for getting at the formal qualities of tragedy, why it's structured in a certain way, what it's trying to do, what its effects on, on the hearer, or reader are supposed to be.

M

Margaret Cohen 05:14

I teach Things Fall Apart with Hegel's theory of tragedy, because I feel that the principles in the collective at the beginning map well onto Antigone and Creon. And I'm just wondering, Ato, if that is a theory that you've thought about?

A

Ato Quayson 05:34

Well, I have, you know, I have used the Hegel, and he appears in the book at some point.

But what I take from Aristotle is not just action, but the atrophy of the possibility of making ethical choices. You know, that is the conditions--so what he interprets as reversal of fortune, which, of course, it's a catastrophe, I look almost, as the prequel to the reversal. And the prequel to the reversal, for me, are conditions that undermine the capacity to make proper ethical choices, which, of course, I extract from the Nicomachean Ethics, where he elaborates the good life and impediments, the good life and so on. Now, I said earlier that it was the Poetics that I was introduced to and ignited my interest. And in fact, I [...] stayed in the Poetics for the long time. But I rather suspect that the Poetics does not give enough--it gives a lot of payout for thinking about the the form, or the plot of tragedy and so on. But it doesn't give enough room to explore the problem of action, shall we say. Action requires, or ethical action actually requires certain conditions, to enable it. The Poetics doesn't give enough room for that, you have to read a lot into it, whereas the Nicomachean Ethics, it's all about, you know, virtue, the possibility of virtue and so on. So, to go back to your question, of course, I mean, the Hegelian reading maps onto Things Fall Apart quite well. But apart from that, is the way that--unbeknownst to Okonkwo, he doesn't recognize it--that his world has changed so much, that when he declares what he assumes to be a military, you know, a call to arms against the District Commissioner, he's calling, making that call under conditions that have so changed, that his people cannot recognize it as a call to arms. So by the time he makes the call to arms--but he doesn't recognize it, he doesn't see that the conditions have altered, what might constitute a comprehensive call to arms. So they ask, for example, why did he do that? He overhears them saying, what would they say? Why did he do that? So that's how I see it, that progressive alteration of the life worlds, these traditional life worlds of this African community, and the contact with colonialism, the irony, or the serious difficulty for Okonkwo, he doesn't see it. He assumes that the wellsprings of action are the same as at the beginning.



John Kerrigan 08:36

Well, like, Richard and Ato, I've always been engaged with the Aristotelian model, partly because my major statement about tragedy, a big book, called *Revenge Tragedy*, begins like Rich's, it [...] with the Greeks. And you can't think about the Greeks without reflecting on Aristotle. But also partly because my central concern in that book, with revenge, takes you very close to the Aristotelian notion that drama is an imitation of an action, because that is what revenge is too, you can't repair wrong unless you engage mimetically with it. On the other hand, I can see the force of what Margaret's saying about the Hegelian model. Because if you're looking at postcolonial situations, you're often watching societies under great stress, undergoing revolutionary development, from an older order, a kind of ancien regime, which might be tribal or aristocratic, into one that's attempting to find a democratic route into the future and a modernizing route into the future. And this is

what Hegel's account of the Antigone is reflecting. It's one reason why in the end, Hegel comes down on the side of Creon. I know that's not at the core of his analysis, but that's where his sympathies lie. So I wanted to put to Ato where he doesn't think that that means that Hegel is often a more useful, as it were, framework for thinking about postcolonial tragedy. Clearly, Okonkwo, is a kind of prince, and we see his fall. We see his tragic flaws in his Oedipus-like anger. And the error that comes from his, maybe flaw, if that's the right word, of being a stammerer, he couldn't get out what he wants to say. So he has to be physical. I see all the various ways in which one could very fruitfully apply Aristotle to Things Fall Apart. But I wonder, nonetheless, whether the background sense of a telescoped transition, a too-rapid movement of this society into modernity, doesn't mean that the Antigone is quite close to it.

A

Ato Quayson 10:32

Yeah, I can see how the Antigone would be close to it in terms of the, quite dramatic, shifts in the basis for undertaking any form of epic action, any epic gesture. But the other thing that the novel illustrates is the gradual and slow emergence of different modes of validation, of self-validation, which are not necessarily in the grand way that Okonkwo would imagine. His son becomes a Christian. His son becomes a Christian, his friend, his best friend, Obierika has some doubts about, for example, the mode of punishment when Okonkwo inadvertently shoots the young boy and he's exiled. Obierika reflects in his mind, but he's not actually able to push the reflection to its conclusion, because that would be a form of--not blasphemy, because that is not--but a form of disavowal. So, he thinks up to a point and then he stops, but that stop, the point at which he stops reflecting, "why this major punishment?," is the point at which a secular mind or secular consciousness would have investigated other ways of judgment. So the point at which Obierika stops his reflections is the point at which a secular consciousness will have then gone on to investigate. So he doesn't do it, but there's a hint of it, which of course, Achebe develops much later. So this, as it were, imagines almost--attempted proliferation is more like an emergence of different modes of validation of aspirational matrices, shall we say. We will see it more fully in his later novels where the contestatory matrices of aspiration--so you are traditional, but I am a traitor, I'm imagined. So as a merchant, I no longer subscribe to the deity and the cult and so--we see, we see it incipiently in Things Fall Apart. So the clash is not simply between old order and new order, even though that exists in the novel. So, for example, the converts, the early converts in Things Fall Apart, are the ones who become court functionaries, they become translators, they become prison wardens, and so on. And so Christianity and colonialism introduce a new grammar, of merit and meritocracy. The old grammar is through hard work, military prowess, farming and so on. The new order is through mastery of the symbolic systems that are brought by--so there is a clash, quite clearly, but below that are all kinds of emergences of different

modes of validation and so on. So if it is again at one level, but I think it eludes the exclusive Hegelian.

J

John Kerrigan 13:47

Can I open a new front on what you're saying about Aristotle by returning to your reservations about his view of action? He is a scientist, he believes that one thing leads to another-- Greek models of causation are not what they became in the Roman and the later, as it were, Baconian world. Nonetheless, he thinks that actions have consequences and also causes. But if you look at someone like Soyinka who's obviously learned a lot from Greek tragedy, Greek models, it's a world of turbulence and causation, inconsequentiality and precarity. A play like *The Road*, for instance, or even *Death and the King's Horseman*, which is about flux and shift from one human state to another. It doesn't map very well onto the Aristotelian structures.

A

Ato Quayson 13:57

Yes. In *Death and the King's horsemen*--back to the question of new modes of validation-- Soyinka is very, as it were, elevating the Yoruba culture. But at the same time, he sneaks in a kind of auto-ethnographic critique. And where it comes from is that, in the early part of the play, when the priest is singing the praises of Elesin, the king's horseman, the priest's singing is supposed to be a form of ritual elicitation. He's eliciting his sacrificial self--the pharmakos, his self as pharmakos--but he's eliciting it through singing all kinds of praise names and epithets. "Do you hear me, oh so-and-so? Do you hear me?" And then I say, "Yes, I hear you." However, the role of Elesin Oba, it's supposed to be, or historically was supposed to have been, that of the military commander. So he's actually head of the army. However, the elicitations, the ritual elicitations, do not invoke anything about military prowess. All the ritual elicitations are of his prowess in bed with a woman. In other words, Soyinka almost put in there that this guy is not fit to be your pharmakos. The mode of of ritual elicitation-- the grammar or the idiom is a standard Yoruba heroic idiom. They call it oriki. But the content is deflationary. But no one notices this until it is too late.

R

Richard Halpern 16:11

But then the the market woman endorses his choice, right? There's a moment hesitation that she does. Yeah, of the play and and says, Yeah, yeah, that it's right. And everyone seems to agree that it's right. And then no one knows for--

A

Ato Quayson 16:25

For one night only.

R

Richard Halpern 16:26

That's all it's going to be.

A

Ato Quayson 16:29

That's all he needs.

R

Richard Halpern 16:30

It's going to be very short term. Well, he says he wants to leave something behind. Right. He's going to--he's making the passage and the last thing he's going to do before this passage is, kind of, leave his seed behind, especially since he thinks his oldest son has been taken from him. I do want to talk about Death and the King's Horseman a little more because on the one hand, it strikes me as, kind of, in a way the perfect Hegelian tragedy

A

Ato Quayson 16:53

Yes, yes, yes, definitely.

R

Richard Halpern 16:54

Almost more than Antigone because-- --because it embodies Hegel's sense that not only are two ethical systems in clash, but the ethical systems are also institutions, right. So the family and the state are not just ethical principles, they're institutions as well. And so here you have the colonial state, and you have the, you know, the tribal rituals of the Yoruba. And you have two characters who, in a kind of absolute sense, embody them. Hegel would say, okay, so tragedy is a clash of two forms of the good. And I guess my question for you is, because this is something that's always bothered me, since Pilkings is so parodied--you know, he's so ridiculous, so obviously--

A

Ato Quayson 16:55

Yes Mocked.

R

Richard Halpern 17:44

--mocked, is his view, that it's wrong to let someone commit suicide? Is that given any ethical seriousness in the play? So do you in the end have a Hegelian situation, which there are two weighty ethical imperatives coming into conflict--clash with each other? Or is it just that one is empty and corrupt? And--

A

Ato Quayson 18:08

I wouldn't say that Pilkings is corrupt, but he's oblivious--

R

Richard Halpern 18:13

Yeah.

A

Ato Quayson 18:13

He's oblivious of the--first of all, he doesn't know anything about the culture, he doesn't bother. Now, Soyinka uses Pilkings's wife, Jane, as a kind of critical counterfoil, and it is Pilkings's wife who, as it were, shows up how empty her husband is. So his declamation is about duty--"it is my duty"--because the play's also about different understandings of duty. He thinks he's doing his duty, as the district commissioner, to prevent what he thinks will ultimately come to a social-political disturbance. So in that sense, he is right. But, because of the degree of misunderstanding--and there are things, that he's not a person who is adequately--he's not compassionate, for example. He doesn't have--he has very few values that would make us admire him. He's not compassionate. He's clearly dismissive of religion. Also, you know, he dismisses both the Muslim and the Christian, the newly converted Christian in his household. So almost everything about him is laughable or dismissible, except his sense of duty. And his sense of duty is what echoes exactly the--Elesin Oba's sense of duty--they're both duty-bound in this--they're both duty-bound spirits, or persons, but this guy, that's all he has. The only thing that he has, that is, the only redeeming feature, characteristic, that he has is his sense of duty. Everything else is false.

J

John Kerrigan 19:47

That's a really interesting way of thinking about it, that Pilkings is brought down by his rigid sense of duty and Elesin by his flexibility in his sense of duty towards the tribe and the customs. I would say that *Death and the King's Horseman* looks like a Hegelian tragedy, kind of wants to be Hegelian tragedy, but Soyinka really does not want it to be Hegelian tragedy. Remember the preface where he says that this must not be a drama about the dilemma that Pilkings faces. He doesn't want him to be a Creon, agonized by the choices,

and that's probably why he's presented so parodically in the play as well, to prevent the audience sympathizing with his dilemmas. I agree that Jane's got a bit more to her. This is why the British Empire, of course, never just sent out diplomats, they made sure their wives went with them, so there'd be some common sense on board. You also mentioned Elesin's son, Olunde, and he's a very interesting character, because in the end, he carries the burden of the tragedy by dying for the group. And yet he also represents modernization. He's awkwardly straddled between the world of medicine and Western knowledge and a fealty to traditional rights. And I wonder whether the play fully realizes his potential or whether he simply, as it were, rounds off the story. I don't know what you feel about that, Ato.

A

Ato Quayson 21:15

Well, what--Olunde's a very fascinating character, because the Pilkings's arrange for him to literally escape from tradition and go and become a doctor in London or England. But when he goes, he's thrust right into the, I think, the Second World War, soldiers and so on. He comes to understand the propaganda machinery and how they misdescribe, or they falsely describe, what is really mayhem. As a doctor in the hospitals, he sees it. Now, this, alerts him to the fact that all cultural values are ultimately relative. And the social contract is based on degrees of falsehood. This sense or this insight is what actually prepares him to sacrifice himself for his community. Since all cultural or social values are relative, his ritual sacrifice is at par with anything else that he has learned elsewhere. Now, this is also a second critique that Soyinka sneaks into the play. His father, anyone who becomes the king's horseman, is trained from infancy to be the sacrificial carrier. Now this kid has left, he has left, he's gone abroad. So it means that Soyinka is saying that, you guys don't--your rituals of preparation are not--a) they're not adequate to the event that has to be done, which is the self-sacrifice. But also, it may actually be redundant. Because this guy who finally laid his life learned how to do this not by being trained as the king's horseman, but by taking the complete--actually by disavowing that entirely. So I think that is also a critique of the, as it were, the apparent--the weaknesses.

R

Richard Halpern 23:18

I want to go back to your reference to Soyinka's preface--

A

Ato Quayson 23:22

Yeah.

R Richard Halpern 23:23
--and, and, how seriously, we should take it as a paradigm for approaching the play. Because I find it--I have to say, I find it completely unreliable.

A Ato Quayson 23:32
I agree with you.

R Richard Halpern 23:33
He says this is not a play about the clash of cultures. Of course this is a play--

A Ato Quayson 23:37
It is not Hegelian. Basically, he's saying it's not Hegelian.

R Richard Halpern 23:40
That's what I'm saying. He's saying he's not writing a Hegelian tragedy, but he is writing a Hegelian tragedy. I think that's what's going on. And he seems to be somewhat sensitive about the fact that he's trying to--and I understand why the phrase "clash of cultures" might sound a little pat, and he wouldn't want a, kind of, pat interpretation. But I think, in fact, this is--it is [...]. The other thing I find interesting about the play is we don't find--I'm forgetting the protagonist's name--

A Ato Quayson 24:09
Elesin Oba.

R Richard Halpern 24:10
His moment of decision never comes, right? I mean, that's the whole point. It's skipped over by the play, because he's taken prisoner before he has a chance to--whatever doubts we may or may not harbor about whether he's going to sacrifice himself are precluded by the fact that he's taken prisoner. And so this gets to your point about the preconditions of ethical action, right? I mean, he simply, he has that taken away from him. And that gets to something--I'll go back to Aristotle again in a minute, because you talked about, and I think this is important, sort of the silences of the Poetics, and that Aristotle doesn't talk about--he doesn't say what the preconditions of ethical action are, which, as

you pointed out, he does go into in the Nicomachean Ethics and largely has to do with being a citizen, right? I mean, you have to be wealthy enough that you're not working, because when you work--

A Ato Quayson 25:00
And you're not sick.

R Richard Halpern 25:02
--not sick, you're not a slave--

A Ato Quayson 25:03
You're not ugly.

R Richard Halpern 25:04
You're none of those things. But there's another thing he's silent about in the Poetics, which is, I think, equally important, and that's fate, or religion. Okay, so, because that's the mechanism in Greek tragedy that largely deprives--I mean, his favorite play is Oedipus the King, but it isn't a play about fate for him at all. There's no religious apparatus, he's determinedly secular, in his approach to--he still says this, this would be a play about, about Oedipus's actions, even though he tries to do a certain theory, the thing that is thwarted.

A Ato Quayson 25:43
But, Richard, I actually this--now, let me turn the tables on you, and ask you a question. You know, in the Eclipse of Action, which I read with great interest--for some reason, as I was reading it, Arthur Miller's The Crucible came strongly to mind. And it comes up now because it is the most, quote unquote, African play in the American tradition--

R Richard Halpern 26:10
Interesting.

A Ato Quayson 26:10
--a lot of ritual, a lot of belief in the otherworldly, a lot of the machinery, right. You know,

the tragic machinery requires a certain, you know, subscription to these--all kinds of these belief systems. Now, you did write about a different Miller play,

R Richard Halpern 26:33
Death of a Salesman.

A Ato Quayson 26:34
Death of a Salesman. But don't you think that The Crucible would have fit in? And The Crucible is--can be subjected to, submitted to a Hegelian reading also.

R Richard Halpern 26:46
That's true. But isn't it--I mean, not to be too reductive, isn't it just a secularist critique of those beliefs? I mean, it's not--I don't think Miller is taking them seriously. He's showing them as a kind of counterpart--you know, whatever, McCarthyist, you know, trials and so forth as a kind of totalizing and totalitarian system in which people are caught. I mean, there is a kind of allegorical dimension to the play.

J John Kerrigan 27:17
I tell you a point. I'd say that witchcraft is one bit of connective tissue between African traditions and European. So it's no accident that Macbeth has been so big in--

A Ato Quayson 27:25
Oh, yeah, absolutely.

J John Kerrigan 27:27
Can I turn to another topic that we haven't quite addressed, which is derivation and the shadow of models of tragedy. I mean, even back in the Greek theater, of course, Euripides is immensely self-conscious about his precursors. But if you think about Soyinka, or even Achebe, certainly a tragic text like Season of Migration to the North, you've got the presence of the Greeks or Shakespeare, very much in the tissue of the reading experience. And I wonder whether you feel that a distinctive condition of postcolonial tragedy, rather like being after the empire, you're after the empire's literature,

M

Margaret Cohen 28:01

I could piggyback on that. I just want to ask about tragedy in theater and tragedy in the novel, and maybe come back to what you originally said about the public and the importance, in Hegel's model, of reconstituting a public of theatergoers that will move beyond the crisis that's represented in *Antigone*, and in terms of talking about how novels interpolate publics and certainly *Season of Migration to the North*, and the unreliable narrator, and the difficulty of knowing what to do with so much of that novel is really important. I'm just wondering if you could throw the difference between the reader and then the public of theatergoers into yours.

A

Ato Quayson 28:44

This guy, Terry Eagleton, I'm going to talk about later, in *Sweet Violence*, he has a really fascinating take on the novel versus theater as traegies. He says the novel--basically to reduce it to the kind of formula--is that the novel has too much time. You know, so--he thinks that the novel is not--of course, all of *Sweet Violence* is full of novels, so he discusses lots of them--but he says, that fundamentally, the novel has too much time. It has too much time to describe the arc of social relations and so on. Whereas the theater, the tragic theater, is precisely about there not being time to resolve the contradictions and the conflict and the clashes and so on. So that the transposition into the novel form--I think that the novel often requires a kind of dramatic--and by dramatic, I mean, both in terms of the staging of characters--but a form of catastrophe. The novel frequently requires a form of catastrophe to ensure that it is really a tragedy.

R

Richard Halpern 30:06

But for Hegel, I think the novel is not essentially a tragic form. I think that this is something I'm going to argue--in my book, I'm going to argue [...] But the essential location of the novel for Hegel is tragicomic. It's a form in which the antagonism between tragedy and comedy gets blunted, that it's serious, but it's not catastrophic. It doesn't mean you can't write tragic novels, and Hegel would have been aware of some obviously famous examples, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. But the novel is not in its essence and in its location a tragic form and it's--it's therefore always pushing a little bit against its generic boundaries, which are ill-defined for Hegel in the first place, when it when it takes to tell a tragic tale.

J

John Kerrigan 31:03

Our friend, Aristotle, wouldn't have had any difficulty in using the term tragedy of a

narrative poem like the Iliad. And I think there's no principled objection to the idea of a concentrated, grim narrative, a novel, being a tragedy. One thinks of [...] or Season of Migration to the North. And actually, most of the examples one would come up would be very concentrated with a limited cast of characters, a bit like a play. It wouldn't be War and Peace, as it were. If you have too many connections, too many proliferations, too many qualifying narratives, you're going to disperse the spirit of tragedy, which in the end is a set of artistic choices as well as existential condition. So I think I'd approach the problem from that angle. Whether the novel has to be tragicomic, I don't know--I mean, one way of thinking about this will be to say, what would Aristotle have made of the Greek romance, which follows, you know, 100 years later? Probably he would have said, well, Homer is tragic, but that can't be. It goes on too long. There are too many interlacing stories.

R

Richard Halpern 32:07

You could argue that Aristotle begins the movement of thinking about tragedy as novel before the fact, simply from the fact that he was an exile from Athens when he wrote the Poetics, he was not--he did not see theater, and this is famously reflected in the fact that in the Poetics, emphasis on spectacle, or, you know, the sort of mechanism of producing plays on stage is simply absent. And his argument says, These are the unimportant part. What matters is plot, right? What matters is narrative. So in a certain way, even before the fact, he's narrativizing tragedy, it's no longer a performance, it's no longer anything with a chorus, it's none of that sort of Dionysian abyss, that you two will go on about in the 19th century, is present at all for Aristotle. The drama is a story. And you can do just as well by having it in book form and reading it as you do sitting in front of it. And in fact, maybe even better, because you're not distracted by what for Aristotle--

J

John Kerrigan 33:12

Well, the Aristotelian is full of such prejudiced remarks about the theater. Think of Dr. Johnson. There's an honorable tradition.

A

Ato Quayson 33:19

The thing, though, is the, as it were, the social impact, because it's a group form of ritual consumption. You know, it's large numbers of people, and the fact that the characters--we all know, the actors are enacting. And that feature of enactment itself introduces a different kind of energy and dynamic. In other words, the theater has a certain immediacy. Also the embodiment, the people, the human beings' flesh and blood, their gestures, their tears and so on, their anguish and anger--imagine Lear screaming at his

daughters or railing against the elements and so on. That immediacy is somewhat attenuated, in tragedy--or, in the novel form, it attenuates it. I think, what the novel does is that depending--if it wants to be grim, to use your word, if it wants to be grim, it can be by showing different sides of grimness, and elaborating it in a very steady way. The beauty of *Season of Migration to the North*--apart from everything else--and this is going back to the after, you know, the postcolonial after--is that it is after in a way that requires us to revisit and reread the things that come prior. It is genealogy. It resituates genealogy by being--coming after them. I have a chapter on Tayeb Salih. One of the things that I say--and I don't know whether this will fly--is that Jean Morris actually wants him not to be a fake Othello. You know, he's been going around saying that, "I'm the man!" You know, going around. She says, you--to prove that you are the man, be a passionate Othello. So when he sees her handkerchief, a handkerchief that is not his own, in her room, and he asks her, she says, it is not yours, but what are you going to do about it? You're not even a real Othello, you punk. This girl is actually telling him. But when he saw--the ritual, he murders her and so on--when he's relaying the story to the interlocutor in the village, the thing that he says, which struck me as very fascinating, is that that is the one thing that he regrets, not killing himself after he killed her. In other words, she enacted Desdemona and invited him to be the true Othello, but he failed. He's like--and this is what I write about--he's like Prufrock. The moment of greatness is offered to him, and he can't do it.



John Kerrigan 36:26

I don't think Prufrock slept with many women. No, I think he was quite right not to kill himself, because he's living out her fantasies of what Othello should be. That's what the novel is addressing. So he's right to resist the tragic paradigm. The pity of it is that he takes up so much of that burden.



Ato Quayson 36:44

But he regrets it. He lives--



John Kerrigan 36:46

Well, that's because, yes, he's a colonial production, as well as a conqueror of the heart of the empire. That's his achievement and failing.



Casey Wayne Patterson 37:03

Thank you again for joining us in this episode of the Center for the Study of the Novel's

podcast Cafe. We would also like to thank Ato Quayson, Richard Halpern, and John Kerrigan for their generosity in agreeing to this conversation. Thanks to our team at the Center for the Study of the Novel: to An Truong Nguyen and Maritza Colon for their operational support; to our graduate coordinators Victoria Zurita, Cynthia Giacotti, and Casey Patterson; to Erik Fredner for editing, consultation, and sound engineering; and to our host and director Margaret Cohen. The Center for the Study of the Novel is a subsidiary of the English Department at Stanford University.