Léopold Senghor (1906-2001) was an outstanding poet and the first president of the West African nation of Senegal. He also was a part, in the 1930s and 1940s, of the négritude movement. The French-speaking African members of this movement created works that celebrated their African roots and protested against the evils of European colonialism. Senghor’s works expressed his pride in his African heritage and his hopes for a post-colonial Africa. ♦ As you read, think about how a writer’s heritage can influence his or her works. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

"Prayer to Masks" by Léopold Senghor

Black mask, red mask, you black and white masks,
Rectangular masks through whom the spirit breathes.
I greet you in silence!
And you too, my lionheaded ancestor.
You guard this place that is closed to any feminine laughter, to any mortal smile.
You purify the air of eternity, here where I breathe the air of my fathers.
Masks of markless faces, free from dimples and wrinkles.
You have composed this image, this my face that bends over the altar of white paper.
In the name of your image, listen to me!
Now while the Africa of despotism is dying—it is the agony of a pitiful princess
Like that of Europe to whom she is connected through the navel—

Now fix your immobile eyes upon your children who have been called
And who sacrifice their lives like the poor man his last garment
So that hereafter we may cry ‘here’ at the rebirth of the world being the leaven that the white flour needs.
For who else would teach rhythm to the world that has died of machines and cannons?
For who else should ejaculate the cry of joy, that arouses the dead and the wise in a new dawn?
Say, who else could return the memory of life to men with a torn hope?
They call us cotton heads, and coffee men, and oily men.
They call us men of death.
But we are the men of the dance whose feet only gain power when they beat the hard soil.

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Questions to Think About

1. To whom is this poem addressed?
2. What does the poet say is dying?
3. Draw Inferences What do you think the poet means when he says, “So that hereafter we may cry ‘here’ at the rebirth of the world…”
4. Draw Conclusions What elements of this poem identify it as in the négritude tradition?