

Lament for Sheku Bayoh

by Hannah Lavery

Teaching notes and discussion questions
for Levels Three and Four English and Literacy

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INTRODUCTION

Lament for Sheku Bayoh was first staged in 2019 at the Edinburgh International Festival. At the time the play was a work-in-progress that sat within the Festival's *You Are Here* programme of interrogative and innovative creative reactions to contemporary social, political, and environmental issues. Taking its cue directly from the programme's name, *Lament for Sheku Bayoh* probes the *here* and the *now* – Scotland in the twenty-first century – to force an honest discussion about race and racial tensions in the country.

The play is rooted in devastating tragedy: it foregrounds for scrutiny the actions that led to the death of 31-year-old Sheku Bayoh while in Police custody following his arrest in Kirkcaldy, Fife in 2015.

The nature of this case might sound horrifyingly familiar – the death of George Floyd in America in 2020 sparked a moment of international outrage and activism. Yet, by comparison, Sheku Bayoh's death (five years earlier) seemed to barely register in Scotland at the time. Why? This play thinks it knows the answer. In a frank foreword to the printed edition of the play, Hannah Lavery states her position clearly: 'We're not the country we promote to others and more importantly to ourselves. People in Scotland who experience racism have to spend so much time getting people to admit racism actually exists' (2021, p. 5).

As well as housing an inherent anger at the apparent injustice surrounding Bayoh's death, the play provides a dramatic space for lamentation and grief.

RANGE:

- Levels 3 and 4 English / Drama

KEY TEXTS:

- *Lament for Sheku Bayoh* (Salamander Street, 2021)
- *Blood Salt Spring* (Birlinn, 2022)

CONTEXT

The reported details of Bayoh's death (on 3 May 2015) are these:

- Police in Fife respond to reports that a black man (in an apparent state of agitation) is carrying a knife
- The man – Sheku Bayoh – is apprehended on the street by attending officers who apply physical force and restraints (he is hit by batons, CS spray, pepper spray, his limbs bound with wrist and leg ties)
- A later toxicology report confirms that Bayoh was under the influence of some drugs on the evening in question
- Despite initial reports, no bladed weapon is found on or nearby the body of the deceased

Bayoh's family argued vehemently that his untimely death was caused by positional asphyxia linked to the methods applied by police. The family alleged that officers overreacted in their physical restraint, an overreaction motivated by their racial bias. Conversely, Police Scotland officers argued that a female attending officer had been attacked by Bayoh in the moments prior to his death. They continued by arguing that any restraining methods that they deployed were a proportional and reasonable response to the physical attack they allege happened to their colleague.

On 12 November 2019, then Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Humza Yousaf, announced details of a planned public inquiry into Mr Bayoh's death that would attempt to ascertain the circumstances leading to the death; consider the Police handling of the immediate aftermath and the subsequent investigation; and consider whether or not racial motivations or bias could be said to have been a factor in the loss of life. Eyewitness and expert testimony delivered during the Inquiry contradicted Police claims. There was, according to these accounts, no evidence of a physical attack on a female officer by Sheku Bayoh. The trial was ongoing at the point at which the play was published.

FORM

The play is, as the title tells us, a lament. There are two distinct meanings for this word – both apply in the context of this play.

Lament

noun

1. *A passionate expression of grief or sorrow*

- In literary terms, a lament is a sorrowful outpouring of grief for the dead.
- In her introduction to the printed edition of *Lament for Sheku Bayoh*, playwright Hannah Lavery explains the function of this play to be 'a keening for a man who has been much maligned' (2021, pg.5).
- In the Gaelic and Celtic traditions, a keening is a graveside lament, typically performed by women.
- Although there is a deeply political social comment to be considered within this play, it is first and foremost a testimonial of the grief felt by those loved ones left behind on Bayoh's passing.
- This play was written and performed exclusively by women.
- The play attempts to give voice and a platform for the pain of the bereaved.

2. *A complaint*

- There are many complaints levelled in this play, largely to do with the approaches adopted by the Police to restrain Bayoh in the minutes leading up to his death.
- Another significant complaint is about the failure of Police Scotland to bring criminal charges against those culpable for the death.
- The playwright also raises a complaint about the nation's continued inability to have an honest conversation about race and racial tensions in contemporary Scotland.

Activities

1. **Re-read The Lament (Part One).** In groups discuss and then come to some conclusions about any three of the questions posed by the **Second Keener** in their monologue.
2. **Read Lament (Part Four).** What do you think is being lamented in this section? Explain your reasoning.
3. **Read Photograph (Part Four).** Why do you think the playwright has chosen to include the song 'Ae Fond Kiss' by Robert Burns at this point in the play?
4. **Look again at Lament (Part Eight).**
 - a) What is the effect of the technique **anaphora** (repetition of the first word in each line) used by the writer in the **Third Keener's opening monologue**?
 - b) In this section each of the speakers (First, Second and Third) speak in the **first person**. What does this make us appreciate at this point in the play?
5. **Turn to the Final Lament.** Stage directions inform us that this section of the play is made up of 'a musical lament' performed to a backdrop of images. Why do you think that the playwright opts to end this play with music and visuals (i.e. photographs) rather than with **words** (i.e. dialogue)?

STRUCTURE

This play is structurally complex. Rather than **acts** and **scenes** we have shorter **dramatic vignettes, long monologues, scripted conversations, descriptions of images, poetry** and **source material** coming ordered in such a way as to present an emotional response to an event.

Re-ordered with similar sections categorised together, we can see that the play contains:

- A lament in ten parts
- Three vignettes labelled as 'Conversations'
- Three short 'Pauses'
- The Photograph (Parts One, Two, Three and Four)
- Thirty Seconds (Parts One and Two)
- 2020 (an update on the public enquiry with verbatim family response)

Activities

1. There are four sections entitled **The Photograph**. Find an image of Sheku Bayoh online. Describe the person you see in ten words.
2. Conveying grief is a complex task for a writer. Lavery decides to divide the lament into ten parts. Try writing a lament. You could work in groups, lamenting the death of someone or something in ten parts. This could be:
 - the death of a celebrity
 - the break-up of a band
 - the closure of a sporting team or competition
 - the end of a season (ie. Summer)
 - the coming to an end of a long-running tv show

The challenge is to convey the spirit of the thing that has been lost, to explain what exactly has been lost by its passing and then to convey your upset at losing it.

3. The play contains sections called 'Pauses'. In these sections documentary evidence is interspersed with creative/imagined responses to them. Using the **Second Pause** (p. 25) as inspiration, come up with your own version. Use documentary evidence (i.e. extracts from newspaper reports) and come up with imagined responses from members of the public these reports.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

There are four 'characters' listed as dramatis personae in this play. However, throughout the play, we hear from more than four voices or people. To tell a complex story, a story where many people offer a number of interpretations of the truth, each actor is required to play multiple roles and adopt different voices throughout. For example:

First Keener

- Reporter from Fife Courier
- The Voice of the BBC
- Eric Baskind, an authority on police restraint and force
- Civilian Witness

Second Keener

- The Voice of the BBC
- Civilian Witness
- Aamer Anwar, family lawyer

Third Keener

- Police Officer
- PC Short

Singer/Fourth Keener

Tasks

1. Read **Lament (Part Two)**. Why do you think Lavery has chosen to incorporate the words of the family lawyer at this point? What purpose does his voice serve here?
2. Read **Lament (Part Six)**. The First Keener adopts another persona. Who is speaking? What are they talking about? Why is it important to hear this voice? Discuss these questions with a partner.
3. If you were to re-write this play, which voices/characters would you foreground/develop further/leave out/add in? Explain your reasoning fully.

THEME

By reflecting on the death of Sheku Bayoh, the playwright examines the following themes:

- Grief
- Racism
- Injustice
- Myth-making (personal, national and international)
- Memory