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Text piece

Poetry Study Reference: Refugee mother and child, Chinua Achebe

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Contributors

www.gradesaver.com - Imaad Isaacs - www.landofenglish.net

Resources consulted

How to approach a poem study aid, JSK Publishers

ENGLISH HOME LANGUAGE

PRESCRIBED POETRY FOR NSC EVALUATION 2009

Achebe	<i>Refugee mother and child</i>
Banoobhai	<i>You cannot know the fears I have</i>
Cummings	<i>i thank You God for most this amazing</i>
Day-Lewis	<i>Walking away</i>
Dikeni	<i>Love poem for my country</i>
Eliot	<i>Preludes</i>
Ghose	<i>Decomposition</i>
Keats	<i>To Autumn</i>
Livingstone	<i>Sunstrike</i>
Mungoshi	<i>If you don't stay bitter for too long</i>
Plath	<i>Mushrooms</i>
Serote	<i>City Johannesburg</i>
Shakespeare	<i>To me, fair friend</i>
Shelley	<i>Ozymandias</i>
Yeats	<i>An Irish airman forsees his death</i>

Refugee mother and child

Chinua Achebe

Biographical Note (courtesy: gradesaver.com)

Chinua Achebe, poet and novelist, is one of the most important living African writers. He is also considered one of the most original literary artists currently writing in English.

Born Albert Chinualumogo Achebe, Chinua Achebe was raised by Christian evangelical parents in the large village Ogidi, in Igboland, Eastern Nigeria. He received early education in English, but grew up surrounded by the complex fusion of Igbo traditions and the colonial legacy. He studied literature and medicine at the University of Ibadan; after graduating, he went to work for the Nigerian Broadcasting Company in Lagos. *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was his first novel. It has been translated into at least forty-five languages, and has sold eight million copies worldwide.

Starting in the 1950s, Achebe was central to a new Nigerian literary movement that drew on the oral traditions of Nigeria's indigenous tribes. Although Achebe writes in English, he attempts to incorporate Igbo vocabulary and narratives. Other novels include: *No Longer At Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), and *A Man of the People* (1966).

Achebe left his career in radio in 1966, during the national unrest and violence that led to the Biafran War. He narrowly escaped harm at the hands of soldiers who believed that his novel, *A Man of the People*, implicated him in the country's first military coup. He began an academic career the next year, taking a position as Senior Research Fellow at the University of Nigeria. That same year, he co-founded a publishing company with Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo. In 1971, he became an editor for *Okike*, a prestigious Nigerian literary magazine. He founded *Iwa ndi Ibo* in 1984; this bilingual publication was dedicated to Igbo cultural life. He was made Emeritus Professor at the University of Nigeria in 1985. He has taught at the University of Massachusetts and the University of Connecticut, and he has received over twenty honorary doctorates from universities around the world. He received Nigeria's highest honor for intellectual achievement, the Nigerian National Merit Award, in 1987. His novel *Anthills of the Savannah* was shortlisted for the Booker McConnell Prize that same year.

Achebe has been active in Nigerian politics since the 1960s. Many of his novels deal with the social and political problems facing his country, including the difficulty of the post-colonial legacy.

He is married and has four children. He is currently the Charles P. Stevenson Professor of Languages and Literature at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, United States.

VOCABULARY

refugee

someone forced to leave their country

Madonna

a name for the Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, often a painting or a sculpture

odours

smells

diarrhoea

condition of excessive frequent and loose bowel movements

ceased

stopped

consequence

importance, significance

laboured

moving with difficulty, requiring hard work

imaadisaacsfoundation
education is not received, it is achieved

QUICK SUMMARY

The speaker describes a mother and her child in a refugee camp. The camp is plagued with starvation, disease and death. Most mothers are too weak to care for their children any longer and therefore 'had long ceased to care'. However, the mother described in the poem is combing the hair of her dying young child tenderly. This little action is noticeable here, because it is not part of a daily routine but an act of love in the face of death.

DETAILED CONTENT ANALYSIS

Lines 1 – 3 (the relative tenderness of the Madonna and Child)

The words “Madonna and Child” are a clear reference to the numerous depictions (sculptures and paintings) of the Virgin Mary with the Christ child. Behind all these paintings is the knowledge that the child will die a terrible death witnessed by its mother. All these ideas are present in the picture described by Achebe of a refugee mother *tenderly* holding her dying child. The refugee mother will have to accept and try to move on after the death of her child, in the same way the Virgin Mary had to come to terms with the crucifixion of her son.

The poet says that no depiction of the Virgin Mary ever expressed more tenderness than does the reality of this refugee mother *tenderly* caring for her dying child.

Lines 4 – 8 (description of the refugee camp)

Achebe vividly describes the refugee camp infected with **starvation, disease** and **death**. He describes the **smells of the camp** where many inhabitants suffer from **diarrhoea**. He describes how their **ribs protrude** as a result of the little flesh on their bodies. The poet also makes reference to the **‘laboured’ movements** of the starving inhabitants with their large distended stomachs (**“blown bellies”**).

Line 9 – 16 (description of the women in the camp and how this mother stands out)

The poet reveals to the reader that most of the women in the camp **no longer care** (**“ceased to care”**). They can no longer cope with the **struggle of surviving** and now only await death. However, the mother Achebe has focused on does not fit this generalization, she looks more tender than a Madonna and Child. She holds a remnant of a smile (**“ghost smile”**) as she grooms her little boy. There is **pride** in her actions and her look as she combs the child’s **rust-coloured** hair. The description of the child’s hair has a terrible pathos, it indicates that the child is suffering from kwashiorkor (protein deficiency/deprivation, an advanced form of starvation).

Lines 17 – 21

The poet is particularly affected by the manner in which the mother carefully parts the child’s hair. He thus, considers all the mothers of the world who comb their children’s hair and prepare them for school. The nature of such an act for the women of the world has no particular significance, but for this mother it is a final act of love for one who was dying – not leaving home for school, but rather leaving life for death.

IMAGERY (courtesy: www.landofenglish.net)

The ghost image in line 10 (ten) and 12 (twelve) is a telling **metaphor** because it points towards death. In the same manner the **“rust”** metaphor to describe the colour of the child’s hair also points toward decay.

The final image, the smile in the last three lines, where the poet compares the woman’s loving attention to her child to an act of putting flowers on a **tiny** grave, is filled with pathos, and makes the sadness of the child’s life and the sorrow of its death, all the more dreadful to bear.

QUESTIONS (courtesy: www.landofenglish.net)

1. Comment on the structure of the poem.
2. Why do you think the poet compares the mother and child to the images of the Virgin Mary and Jesus as a baby?
3. Why would the mother described in the poem have to forget her son?
4. Describe the condition of the refugee camp.
5. Why do you think there is ‘singing’ the mother’s eyes?
6. How is the combing of the child’s hair similar to putting flowers on a grave?
7. Why do you think the poet uses the word ‘heavy’ to describe the smells in the camp?
8. Show how the use of imagery contributes to the mood of the poem.
9. Comment on the significance of the words “another life” in line 16.
10. Children are usually washed and dried by cleaning. Why do you think the poet has chosen these words (‘washed out’ and ‘dried up’) to describe ‘unwashed’ starving children – what contrast does he create?
11. Why do you think he uses imagery with reference to a ‘ghost’ / and ghost characteristics?
12. What effect does the description of the **‘tiny’** grave on you?
13. Would you describe this poem as political in a way? Explain your answer.

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“He is not of us, unless he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself”

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