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THE FIRST DAY AFTER THE WAR

We heard the songs of a wedding party.
We saw a soft light
Coiling round the young blades of grass
At first we hesitated, then we saw her footprints,
Her face emerged, then her eyes of freedom! 5
She woke us up with a smile saying,
‘What day is this that comes suddenly?’
We said, ‘It is the first day after the war’.
Then without waiting we ran to the open space
Ululating to the mountains and the pathways 10
Calling people from all the circles of the earth.
We shook up the old man demanding a festival
We asked for all the first fruits of the season.
We held hands with a stranger
We shouted across the waterfalls 15
People came from all lands
It was the first day of peace.
We saw our Ancestors travelling tall on the horizon.

Mazisi Kunene

NOTES

UNDERSTANDING THE POEM

- Mazisi Kunene wrote much of his poetry in South Africa, in the time of Apartheid – a period in which black people were discriminated against and oppressed. His poem describes the joy that people felt at the ending of this system of government.
- The poem lists a number of ways in which the people celebrated the news. Notice the variety of the actions and the jubilation this shows. The news is so wonderful that we see how people of all types celebrate together and *'held hands with a stranger'* (line 14).

FORM AND STRUCTURE

- This poem uses free verse which seems appropriate for its theme. Notice the repetitive form of the line structure of lines 12 to 15, perhaps implying that the overwhelming joy prompted an unrestrained physical response, and that the people ran around responding impulsively to the situation.

POETIC/LANGUAGE DEVICES

- Kunene uses simple but effective diction to capture the scene. This seems to add to the spontaneous nature of the excitement displayed – the actions speak for themselves.
- The *'soft light'* (line 2) creates an image of contained optimism and hope, as if the viewers are not sure whether to believe what the light might be indicating. This uncertainty is clear in the hesitation in line 4 until the truth *'emerged'* (line 5), and the realisation set in.
- Notice the contrast that follows as *'without waiting'* (line 9) the celebration begins that unifies humanity *'from all lands'* (line 16).

SOUND DEVICES

- The poem begins with a reference to the *'songs'* of a party and the association of sound and joy is carried through the poem from the **onomatopoeia** of *'ululating'* (line 10) to the shouts of enthusiasm that compare with nature's music as the people *'shouted across the waterfalls'* (line 15).
- The **alliteration** of *'first fruits'* (line 13) alerts the reader to the significance of the moment, while the use of this device in the final line lends the *'Ancestors'* renewed stature as they are *'travelling tall'* (line 18) in response to the event.

LINE BY LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

We heard the songs of a wedding party.

The day after the war had ended – after Apartheid had been defeated – the people of South Africa heard the songs of a wedding party. These were songs of joy, of celebration. A wedding indicates the joining together of two people and the beginning of a new life together. This can also suggest that two groups – white and black – have come together at the end of the “war”. In the Zulu culture a wedding is a symbol of fertility – thus this image also suggests new life and the rebirth of a nation.

The opening reference to a ‘*wedding party*’ could literally refer to a celebration being heard from a distance, while figuratively it could refer to exciting rumours of a ‘*marriage*’ or coming together of opposing parties to forge a united future.

LINES 2 & 3

We saw a soft light

Coiling round the young blades of grass

The ‘*soft light*’ (metaphor) creates an image of contained optimism and hope, as if the viewers are not sure whether to believe what the light might be indicating. The ‘*soft light*’ can also represent the soft light of daybreak which encompasses the young blades of grass like a snake ‘*coiling*’ round them. The reader gets the idea that the people are slowly coming to grips with the idea that the war is over.

The rumours filter down to the people in the rural villages, figuratively like a soft light, and are welcome and much appreciated after the darkness of oppression.

Literally the ‘*young blades*’ could refer to freshly grown grass. Figuratively this may allude to young men, eager to experience excitement.

LINE 4

At first we hesitated, then we saw her footprints,

The uncertainty is still clear in the hesitation until the truth ‘*emerged*’ (line 5), and the realisation set in. *Her face emerged, then her eyes of freedom!*

- Literally, ‘*footprints*’ would be the physical imprint on the ground made by feet;
- Figuratively, it may refer to the lasting impact of another’s actions, words or behaviour.
- In keeping with the image of the dawn breaking (line 2), the footprints might belong to the sun whose face finally emerges, or the light gradually spreading across the landscape.

LINE 5

Her face emerged, then her eyes of freedom!

The sun finally showed her face – a new day had dawned for South Africa. Note the personification. In her eyes the sun carried the message of freedom – freedom from Apartheid. The dramatic exclamation mark underlines the idea of excitement, joy and celebration. In most cultures the sun is a symbol of life.

The literal female figure who leaves '*her footprints*' (line 4) can also be interpreted as the figurative '*messenger*' that delivers the news that freedom has arrived, and whose '*eyes of freedom*' (line 5) convey this truth.

LINE 6

She woke us up with a smile saying,

These words indicate that the people were finally sure that the war was really over. The sun/female figure had convinced them of that reality.

LINES 7 & 8

'What day is this that comes suddenly?'
We said, 'It is the first day after the war'.

Note the direct speech. The sun asked what day came so suddenly and unexpectedly. The people confirmed that it was the first day after the war – that freedom had finally arrived.

LINE 9

Then without waiting we ran to the open space

The people ran to share the wonderful news with all other people without waiting.

This line can have the following interpretations:

- Their joy and excitement needed vocal and physical expression so they ran to a place where they could vent their emotions.
- They are overcome with joy and wish to share their happiness with everyone, especially those in remote areas who might not have heard the news.
- People would not have been able to run into '*open space*' or travel safely across the mountains and pathways so freely during a war, especially during the apartheid era when movement of people was controlled.

Notice the contrast '*At first we hesitated,*' (line 4) to '*without waiting*' (line 9) the celebration begins that unifies humanity '*from all lands*' (line 16).

LINE 10 & 11

*Ululating to the mountains and the pathways
Calling people from all the circles of the earth.*

The uninhibited joy and jubilation is expressed in the wild actions of the speaker who cannot contain or restrain the physical need for action at this turn of events. The speaker tells the reader that '*without waiting we ran*' (line 9), '*Ululating ... Calling ...*', while the imagery vividly displays the excitement, the shouting and celebrating.

The association of sound and joy is carried through the poem from the **onomatopoeia** of '*ululating*' (line 10) to the shouts of enthusiasm that compare with nature's music as the people '*shouted across the waterfalls*' (line 15).

They call people '*from all circles*' – nobody is excluded. This exciting news of their freedom is shared with **all** people – unlike Apartheid where some people were excluded.

LINE 12

We shook up the old man demanding a festival

When someone is '*shook up*' (line 12) this usually refers to their being disturbed, unsettled or perhaps startled by some shock or fright. This may refer to the speaker's action of physically shaking an old man as they try to convey the joy of the news.

'*Old man*' can have the following interpretations:

- The '*old man*' could be symbolic of the older generation who have endured many disappointments and who are wary of believing the good news.
- It may allude to the cynics who are reluctant to embrace the joy of the moment,
- or even old folk who are hard of hearing, asleep or in some way uncomprehending of the situation.
- A tribal leader who would have been too old to leave the tribal lands and fight the war against Apartheid.

The people insisted on having a festival for their newly acquired freedom.

LINE 13

We asked for all the first fruits of the season.

The **alliteration** of '*first fruits*' (line 13) alerts the reader to the significance of the moment.

'*First fruits*' is a metaphor referring to the result of freedom/democracy, e.g. quality education, equal opportunities, jobs, etc.

'Season' is a metaphor for the newly acquired freedom, democracy.

LINE 14

We held hands with a stranger

The news is so wonderful that we see how people of all types celebrate together and '*held hands with a stranger*'. In celebrating the end of the war, the people joined hands with strangers and shouted their joy to the world. This is an effective description of the euphoria after the first free election in 1994 when people from all over the world came to South Africa to celebrate the new democracy.

LINE 15

We shouted across the waterfalls

The uninhibited joy and jubilation continues in the wild actions of the speaker who cannot contain or restrain the physical need for action at this turn of events. The speaker tells the reader, '*We shouted across the waterfalls*' while the imagery vividly displays the excitement, the shouting and celebrating.

The poem begins with a reference to the '*songs*' of a party and the association of sound and joy is carried through the poem from the **onomatopoeia** of '*ululating*' (line 10) to the shouts of enthusiasm that compare with nature's music as the people '*shouted across the waterfalls*' in line 15.

LINE 16

People came from all lands

This is an effective description of the euphoria after the first free election in 1994 when people from all over the world came to South Africa to celebrate the new democracy.

This also refers to political exiles who came back to their country and were reunited with their loved-ones.

LINE 17

It was the first day of peace.

Note the effective **antithesis** – the title and line 8 refer to the first day after the **war**. Line 17 refers to the first day of **peace**.

The day had progressed from the first day after the war to the first day of peace – this has a positive effect on the reader and fills him/her with a sense of hope and optimism for the New South Africa.

LINE 18

We saw our Ancestors travelling tall on the horizon.

A capital letter is used for the word 'Ancestors' – to underline their importance. The poet also uses **alliteration** to describe their action of '*travelling tall*' to draw the reader's attention to their importance.

The capital letter used for 'Ancestors' gives the word status – emphasises it – and this is amplified by the forbears '*travelling tall*' as they take pride and satisfaction in the recent development.

The effectiveness of the final line is achieved through the image created – that of the spiritual world paying tribute and also enjoying what has come to pass, as the silhouettes are visible '*on the horizon*'.

The **alliteration** in '*travelling tall*' adds to the impact of the line.

The **alliteration** also highlights the two words in the middle of the final line emphasising that the Ancestors are now able to move freely in the lives of the people and that they are standing '*tall*' and proud.

Both the content itself and the way in which it is conveyed, make this an effective final line for the poem.

QUESTIONS & SUGGESTED ANSWERS

1. What clues suggest the rural setting of the poem? Quote from the poem to support your answer.
The 'young blades of grass' (line 3), the 'open spaces' (line 9), the 'mountains and pathways' (line 10) and the 'watrefalls' (line 15) all suggest that the events take place in the countryside.
2. Why do you think the people '*ran to the open space*' (line 9)?
 - **Their joy and excitement needed vocal and physical expression so they ran to a place where they could vent their emotions.**
 - **They are overcome with joy and wish to share their happiness with everyone, especially those in remote areas who might not have heard the news.**
 - **People would not have been able to run into 'open space' or travel safely across the mountains and pathways so freely during a war, especially during the apartheid era when movement of people was controlled.**

3. Discuss the possible literal and figurative meanings of the
- 3.1. *'footprints'* (line 4) and
 - Literally, *'footprints'* (line 4) would be the physical imprint on the ground made by feet;
 - Figuratively, it may refer to the lasting impact of another's actions, words or behaviour.
 - In keeping with the image of the dawn breaking, the footprints might belong to the sun whose face finally emerges, or the light gradually spreading across the landscape.
- 3.2. the *'young blades'* (line 3).
 - Literally the *'young blades'* (line 3) could refer to freshly grown grass, while
 - Figuratively this may allude to young men, eager to experience excitement.
- 4.1. What does the expression *'shook up'* (line 12) mean?
When someone is *'shook up'* (line 12) this usually refers to their being disturbed, unsettled or perhaps startled by some shock or fright.
- 4.2. How do you interpret it in this context?
This may refer to the speaker's action of physically shaking an old man as they try to convey the joy of the news.
- 4.3. Who might the *'old man'* (line 12) be?
 - The *'old man'* (line 12) could be symbolic of the older generation who have endured many disappointments and who are wary of believing the good news.
 - It may allude to the cynics who are reluctant to embrace the joy of the moment,
 - or even old folk who are hard of hearing, asleep or in some way uncomprehending of the situation.
 - A tribal leader who would have been too old to leave the tribal lands and fight the war against apartheid.
5. Critically comment on the effectiveness of the final line of Kunene's poem.
 - The capital letter used for *'Ancestors'* (line 18) gives the word status – emphasises it – and this is amplified by the forbears *'travelling tall'* (line 18) as they take pride and satisfaction in the recent development.
 - The effectiveness of the final line is achieved through the image created, that of the spiritual world paying tribute and also enjoying what has come to pass, as the silhouettes are visible *'on the horizon'* (line 18).
 - The alliteration in *'travelling tall'* (line 18) adds to the impact of the line.

- The alliteration also highlights the two words in the middle of the final line emphasising that the Ancestors are now able to move freely in the lives of the people and that they are standing '*tall*' and proud.
- Thus, both the content itself and the way in which it is conveyed, make this an effective final line for the poem.

- 6.1. How would you describe the mood of the opening line of the poem?
Uncertain, tentatively optimistic.
- 6.2. Quote a phrase from the poem that indicates this mood.
'we hesitated' (line 4), 'heard ... songs' (line 1), '... soft light' (line 2).
7. What methods does the poet employ to indicate the importance of the ancestors?
- A capital letter is used for the word '*Ancestors*'.
 - The poet uses alliteration to describe their action of '*travelling tall*' (line 18) to draw the reader's attention to their importance
8. Comment on the poet's use of literal and figurative language in the poem.
- The opening reference to a '*wedding party*' (line 1) could literally refer to a celebration being heard from a distance, while figuratively it could refer to exciting rumours of a '*marriage*' or coming together of opposing parties to forge a united future.
 - The rumours filter down to the people in the rural villages, figuratively like a soft light, and are welcome and much appreciated in the darkness of oppression.
 - The literal female figure who leaves '*her footprints*' (line 4) can also be interpreted as the figurative '*messenger*' that delivers the news that freedom has arrived, and whose '*eyes of freedom*' (line 5) convey this truth.
9. Critically discuss the effectiveness of the poem as an expression of joy and liberation.
- The uninhibited joy and jubilation is expressed in the wild actions of the speaker who cannot contain or restrain the physical need for action at this turn of events.
 - The speaker tells the reader that '*without waiting we ran*' (line 9), '*Ululating ... Calling ... demanding*' (lines 10 – 12), while the imagery vividly displays the excitement, the shouting and celebrating.
 - The conclusive naming of the '*first day of peace*' (line 17) underlines the unity implicit in '*people came from all lands*' (line 16).

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