

## **Vultures - Chinua Achebe**

### **SUMMARY**

- Two vultures roosting by a roadside prompt thoughts on the nature of evil.
- The poem is set in the Biafran war.
- The second part of the poem refers explicitly to the Second World War.
- By implication/suggestion the poem is relevant to all human conflict.
- The poem begins with a graphic and unpleasant description of a pair of vultures who nestle lovingly together after feasting on a corpse.
- The poet comments on the strangeness of love existing in places where one would not expect.
- He then goes on to consider the love a concentration camp commandant shows to his family, having spent the day burning human corpses, he buys his child sweets on the way home.
- The ending/conclusion of the poem is ambiguous/two sided. On one hand, Achebe praises God and providence that even the cruellest of creatures can show love. On the other hand, these creatures show love for their families only and so allow themselves to commit cruel acts towards others.

### **Stanza1**

#### **Line 1**

*greyness* – This creates a depressing start to the poem

#### **Line 2-3**

*drizzle of one despondent/dawn* – the grimness is emphasised by the alliteration of the 'd'.  
*drizzle* - this emphasises the miserable scene.

despondent dawn – personification reinforces the gloomy atmosphere

#### **Line 3**

*unstirred* – there is no movement - emphasising the lack of activity

*harbingers of sunbreak* – usually, birds announce the arrival of dawn. However, that day was so depressing that were the birds were quiet.

#### **Lines 4-6**

dawn is supposed to be a symbol of renewal and a new beginning, but the presence of the vultures negates this positive association.

They are sitting on the 'broken bone' of a dead tree. This metaphor suggests that the tree is like a carcass itself, and it's bare, bleached branches are like bonest hat have picked clean by the vultures.

This makes it seem as though the vultures presence and activities have a negative effect on their surroundings. They feed on death, and their presence seems to cover their environment in a deathly shroud.

### **Lines 7-8**

nestled close to his mate – we don't associate vultures with love. Vultures symbolize death and decomposition.

### **Lines 8-9**

*his smooth bashed-in head* – this description of the vultures' heads suggests something that has been damaged or harmed.

bashed-in – suggests violence and creates a terrifying image of the vultures.

### **Lines 9-13**

*a pebble/on a stem rooted in/a dump of gross/feathers, inclined affectionately/to hers* – The metaphor of the pebble is appropriate, as the vulture's head is small in comparison to its body, and the adjectives 'dump' and 'gross' emphasise how ugly the bird is. Yet his head is 'inclined affectionately to hers', so the attraction between the pair of vultures is clear to see. Their affectionate actions towards each other is unexpected in this context, after such an ugly description of them.

### **Lines 13-21**

*Yesterday they picked/the eyes of a swollen/corpse in a water logged/ trench and ate the/things in its bowel* –

Achebe gives an extremely distasteful description of how the vultures had, the day before, fed on a dead animal. The phrases '*picked the eyes*' and '*swollen corpse*' are disgusting, and Achebe goes on to relate that the birds ate the contents of the animals intestines too. They had then had their fill, or were '*full gorged*', and settled on a branch. What remained of the corpse is described as a '*hollow remnant*' which the vultures observed with '*cold telescopic eyes*'. There is no inkling here, at the end of the first section, of any gentleness at all.

## **STANZA 2**

### **Line 22**

*Strange* – reflection on something is suggested by the use of the word '*strange*' as if the poet is stopping to think. The single word emphasises the oddity of the description that follows in this stanza.

### **Line 26**

*charnel house* – Achebe contrasts the '*light*' of love with the "dark" of death by mentioning that in this darkest of environments, the '*charnel-house*', a storage place for corpses, there is the presence of love.

### **Line 27**

*coil up* – this conjures up the image of a snake.

### **Lines 22-29**

*Strange/indeed how love in other/ways so particular/will pick a corner/in that charnel house/tidy it and coil up there, perhaps/even fall asleep-her face/turned to the wall.* –

Love is personified in this section. Love is seen to pick a corner and tidy up and fall asleep. Love is given human characteristics. It is a sharp contrast to the rotting corpse and death mentioned in the first section of the poem.

This idea marks a shift in the poem's focus, away from the vultures. The second section ends, however, with the remark that if this happened, love's face would be '*turned to the wall*', presumably to avoid the sight of skeletal remains.

The exclamation mark at the end emphasises that love can't stand to look at the atrocities contained within.

### **STANZA 3**

#### **Line 30**

*Thus the Commandant at Belsen* – Achebe identifies *the charnel house* as the Belsen Concentration Camp where Jews and other prisoners were held and killed-their bodies were often incinerated/burned. Anne Frank was killed here as well as 50,000 others. The camp was liberated in 1945.

The Commandant was a German officer in charge of a camp or unit. This section of the poem focuses on the Commandant of that camp as he leaves at the end of a day.

#### **Line 33**

*human roast* – refers to the victims in the concentration camp as if they were being cooked. This is a shocking phrase, very visual and descriptive. Achebe's description of him stresses the thoroughly unpleasant side.

#### **Lines 34-35**

*hairy/nostrils* – the commandant's hairy nostrils are like the vultures' feathers. Both creatures are ugly but both are capable of love.

*'rebelliously'* suggests that the smell refuses to go away even after the Commandant has left the camp.

#### **Lines 35-40**

In line 35, Achebe shows a different side to the Commandant, just as he demonstrated the affection between the pair of vultures. He describes how this seemingly repulsive man will stop at a sweet-shop on his way home to buy some chocolate for his children.

The children are referred to as '*his tender offspring*', and he is their '*Daddy*'.

Here, Achebe creates a feeling of a loving family; the children are probably blissfully unaware of what their father's work involves. They await his homecoming and he enjoys bringing them a treat at the end of the day.

*Daddy's/return* – an ordinary domestic/homely image is used to suggest the father's love.

### **STANZA 4**

In the fourth stanza Achebe presents us with two alternative conclusions to draw from the behaviour of the vultures and the Commandant.

He suggests that we might '*Praise bounteous providence*', and the phrase '*if you will*' suggests that this is the alternative he would prefer us to choose.

He is asking us to rejoice in the fact that an '*ogre*' has '*a tiny glow-worm tenderness*', using a metaphor to describe the element of love that lights up, like a glow worm, the Commandant's otherwise despicable life. This love is '*encapsulated / in icy caverns of a cruel / heart*': Achebe uses another metaphor to convey how cold the Commandant's heart is.

#### **Line 41-42**

*Praise bounteous/providence* – Biblical language referring to all the good things God gives to mankind.

#### **Line 43**

*Ogre* – a type of monster-here it represents evil and the glow worm represents love.

#### **Lines 43-47**

*that grants even an ogre/a tiny glow worm/tenderness encapsulated/in icy caverns of a cruel/heart* –

Metaphor – This image describes the element of love that lights up, like a *glow worm*, the Commandant's otherwise despicable life. This love is '*encapsulated / in icy caverns of a cruel / heart*'

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#### **Line 46**

*icy caverns of a cruel* – alliteration used for impact-sharp sounds.

#### **Line 49**

*Kindred* – related by blood, close family, the same.

#### **Line 50**

*Perpetuity* – the state of continuing forever.

#### **Lines 47-51**

*or else despair/for in the very germ/of that kindred love is/lodged the perpetuity/of evil* – the final section of the poem is one of despair as Achebe believes that evil will continue forever even if there is the potential for love in the same being.

#### **Themes**

Achebe's conclusion of the poem offers a choice of responses (a) hope because love can exist in even the most evil of creatures. (b) despair, because despite love that cannot stop committing evil.

#### **Tone**

Identify the tone in each stanza. Substantiate and explain how this reflects the mood.