

## THE ZULU GIRL

77

WHEN in the sun the hot red acres smoulder,  
Down where the sweating gang its labour plies,  
A girl flings down her hoe, and from her shoulder  
Unslings her child tormented by the flies.

She takes him to a ring of shadow pooled  
By thorn-trees: purpled with the blood of ticks,  
While her sharp nails, in slow caresses ruled,  
Prowl through his hair with sharp electric clicks,  
His sleepy mouth plugged by the heavy ripple,  
Tugs like a puppy, grunting as he feeds: 10  
Through his frail nerves her own deep languors ripple  
Like a broad river sighing through its reeds.

Yet in that drowsy stream his flesh imbibes  
An old unquenched unmotherable heat—  
The curbed ferocity of beaten tribes,  
The sullen dignity of their defeat.

Her body looms above him like a hill  
Within whose shade a village lies at rest,  
Or the first cloud so terrible and still  
That bears the coming harvest in its breast. 20

### Questions

1. The phrase 'the hot red acres smoulder' implies a comparison. What things are compared, and how are they similar?
2. What does the phrase 'sweating gang' (line 2) tell you about the kind of labour they are engaged in?
3. What does the phrase 'flings down' (line 3) tell you about the feelings of the girl?
4. What does 'tormented' (line 4) tell you about the child's circumstances that a word such as 'irritated' does not?

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Poems for discussion

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5. What is suggested by 'pooled' (line 5)?
  6. What was 'purpled by the blood of ticks' (line 6)?
  7. What makes the 'sharp electric clicks' (line 8)? Why 'electric'?
  8. (a) What does the phrase 'like a puppy' (line 10) tell you about the child and the way it feeds?  
(b) What feeling does this phrase suggest the writer wanted the reader to have towards the child?
  9. What do you think the writer intended to convey by 'her own deep languors' (line 11)?
  10. What is suggested by the simile in line 12?
  11. What does the phrase 'curbed ferocity' (line 15) suggest?
  12. In the simile in lines 17 to 18 what things are compared, and how are they similar?
  13. How may a cloud be said to bear 'the coming harvest in its breast' (line 20)?
  14. What are the implications of the simile in lines 19 and 20?
  15. What is 'the coming harvest' which the writer is thinking of in this context?
1. The comparison is between earth and something burning slowly, e.g. glowing coals. They are similar in colour, and in that both suggest subdued heat.
  2. It is hard physical labour in an organized group under an overseer.
  3. That she is resentful and impatient, and relieved and thankful to get rid of the hoe.
  4. 'Tormented' suggests not only that the child is irritated by the flies, but also that, slung on its mother's back, it is helpless.
  5. Circular shape and coolness, a very desirable oasis in the heat (if the shadow is circular the sun must be overhead).
  6. Probably 'the sharp nails', possibly the trees themselves against which cattle have rubbed themselves, or the ring of shadow in which ticks have been trampled by the cattle.
  7. The nails killing lice or ticks. 'Electric' suggests a dry, crisp, crackling sound like that made by a spark of electricity.
  8. (a) It suggests that the child feeds animal-like, eagerly, vigorously, blindly, instinctively. (b) A feeling of protectiveness, sympathy for its helplessness, as well as tolerant, good-humoured superiority.
  9. Her inherited and unrealized desires or yearnings.
  10. It suggests something calm on the surface and apparently slow-moving, but nevertheless powerful.
  11. A naturally warlike disposition now temporarily restrained.
  12. The girl's body and a hill, the village and the child. Body and hill are similar in being high above, and in supplying protection, shelter, and a sense of security.
  13. The cloud carries the rain which produces the harvest.
  14. The girl's body is like the cloud because it looms over the child like a cloud over the earth, because it carries life-giving fluid, the means of awakening to life the seed of the harvest to be reaped, and because it is dark and threatening in the calm before the storm.
  15. The rebellion of the 'beaten tribes' is the harvest the white man will reap.