

FIRST DAY AFTER THE WAR
Mazisi Kunene

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.

Background notes of poet

Mzisi Kunene was born in South Africa, in 1938. He studied in South Africa and in the United Kingdom, and worked as an academic in the United States of America before returning to South Africa. His best known work is the poem, 'Emperor Shaka the Great', which was originally written in isiZulu and translated into English. He died in 2006.

Title:

There is a sense of a new beginning ► 'First Day'.

This shows/signals hope and change after the suffering and the struggle of the apartheid period/war.

Theme:

- The poem carries a message of renewal and hope to the people who suffered and struggled during apartheid and announces a new beginning, joy and peace that it will bring.
- The poem is a celebration of the end of apartheid and of new beginnings.
- In the last line of the poem there is a reference to the ancestors, who symbolise the past and the roots of the community.
- 'We saw our ancestors travelling tall on the horizon' suggests that people should take their direction from the past and build something new.

Tone / Mood:

Tone: Upbeat

Mood: excitement and jubilation

The tone is initially one of disbelief that oppression has come to an end, then restrained joy, followed by ecstatic jubilation and pride.

It can also be described as celebratory, enthusiastic and excited.

- In the first lines the first suggestions of a new beginning is heard by the people ► gentle tone
- As the poem progresses the poet picks up the pace and it increases in excitement ► celebratory mood.
- Lines 14 – 18 ► emphatic tone created ► peace has arrived
- Last line ► serious tone ► poet puts forward his message in the narrative.

Content – Focus DICTION

- Mzisi 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 celebrate 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)
- This poem is a reminder of history and the need to look back and take direction from the ancestors before moving into the future.

- The allusion to freedom illustrates the lifting of the restrictions and oppression of the apartheid era. This is cause for jubilation.
- 'Then without waiting we ran to the open space' conveys the people's excitement. Their joy is spontaneous, unrestrained and boundless. They erupt in celebration.
- 'suddenly' suggests the ending of oppression and the subsequent unification are unexpected pleasures to be celebrated.
- The end of the war and the eradication of suffering is met with great festivity and jubilation.
- 'calling', 'shook', 'demanding' and 'shouted' are forceful. They convey people's enthusiasm and determination to enjoy the occasion. They are unable to contain their joy, which is expressed in wild actions.
- The repetition of 'we' emphasises the coming together of people who were previously divided. This is reinforced by the holding of hands – a gesture of intimacy and comfort.
- There is a sense of harmony, ubuntu and accord. A common humanity is celebrated.
- 'first fruits of the season'. The occasion is so great that only the best will do. It is also an expression of gratitude of blessings bestowed.
- The announcement of the advent of democracy is shared with all. The spirit is infectious and people come from all over the world to celebrate the unification.
- The ancestors join the celebration and are proud – 'travelling tall'.

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.
- The poem is written in the past tense although it is a vision of the future.
- The poem appeals to our sense of hearing which is a clear description of the joy felt. ► Diction ► 'the songs' / 'ululating' and the people who 'shouted'
- The two lines of dialogue follow the African tradition of storytelling.
- The poem is paced like a story with a slow beginning / climax and a concluding message.

Poetic / language devices/Diction/Imagery

- 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.
- ‘wedding party’ – the wedding metaphor suggests that this is a day of celebration. It is the beginning of a new life and a time of peace and harmony. The reference to ‘songs’ at the ‘wedding party’ conveys joyous celebration.
- The ‘soft light’ (line 2)/ ‘young blades of grass’ / ‘the mountains and pathways’ / ‘first fruits of the season’ / ‘waterfalls’ / ‘horizon’ creates an image of contained optimism and hope/ beauty, which are images of nature that have to do with aspects of the arrival of peace.
- These images of nature also remind people of their links to nature and their rootedness in the land
- The images of growth in nature: ‘young blades of grass’ / ‘first fruits of the season’ symbolise the new and optimistic vision of peace as something that will grow and flourish.
- Metaphor (lines 2 – 3) ‘soft light coiling’ is a juxtaposition of the softness of the light with the tightness or sinewy strength of a coiling spring or snake. ► This comparison suggests strength and power of the poets vision for the future.
- Lines 4 – 7: freedom personified as a woman ► suggests the nurturing nature of freedom ► associated with women ► this is in contrast to the aggression of war which is associated with men.
- ‘ululating’ – onomatopoeia --- conveys the sound of the people’s spontaneity and expression of ecstasy and elation. The word is associated with traditional forms of African celebration.
- 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.
- Alliteration (line 18) ‘travelling tall’ ► creates rhythm and liveliness which is a reminder of the importance of the ancestors.
- A strong sense of **movement** is created:
 - a gentle start ► the people are passive receivers of good news ► diction: ‘heard’/ ‘saw’ (lines 1 - 2)
 - Followed by the slow movement of

- the 'coiling' light, and the slight uncertainty when they 'hesitated' in line 4.
- Pace picks up dramatically in line 9 ► People 'without waiting', 'ran'.
 - They had become impatient for their freedom when they 'shook up' the man, 'demanding a festival'.
 - Pace is calmer from line 13 ► people 'asked' and 'held hands' (line 14) which leads to the arrival of 'the first day of peace' (line 17).
- The poet creates an inclusive, generous vision of the future where everyone embraces one another ► 'we held hands with a stranger' (line 14) / 'people came from all lands' (line 16)

Vocabulary:

ululating - wailing or howling

Questions:

1. What clues suggest the rural setting of the poem? Quote from the poem to support your answer.
2. Why do you think the people 'ran to the open space' (line 9)?
3. Discuss the possible literal and figurative meanings of the 'footprints' (line 4) and the 'young blades' (line 3).
4. (a) What does the expression 'shook up' (line 12) mean?
 (b) How do you interpret it in this context?
 (c) Who might the 'old man' (line 12) be?
5. Critically comment on the effectiveness of the final line of Kunene's poem.

