

## Vultures-Chinua Achebe

### MATCHES:

Nothing's Changed, Limbo, Island Man-Past and Present

Limbo, Two Scavengers in a Truck, Nothing's Changed-Use of Contrast

### CHINUA ACHEBE (Black male poet):

1. Chinua Achebe was born in the village of Ogidi, Nigeria in Western Africa in 1931.
2. His father was a missionary and so Achebe was brought up as a Christian, though he had many of the traditions and values of the Ibo culture.
3. He worked for the Nigerian Broadcasting Company before leaving in 1966 to concentrate on writing.
4. During conflict between the Nigerians and Biafrans (1967-1970), Achebe worked as a diplomat for the Biafran cause.
5. In the early stages of the war, he and his wife had a narrow escape from death when their flat was bombed.
6. By 1970 the Biafran tribe had been starved into surrendering.
7. He taught in many American universities, but he is also known for being a novelist who explores how European culture affected African society.
8. His novels describe the traditions and speech of the Ibo tribe and follows their struggle to free themselves from the European culture and influences.
9. This poem is seen as an aspect of this struggle.
10. Vultures are compared to a Nazi Commandant who preys greedily and ruthlessly on the helpless.
11. Chinua Achebe's war experiences are reflected in the 1971 collection Beware, Soul Brother, where the poem Vultures first appeared.

### SETTING AND CONTEXT:

1. Two vultures roosting by a roadside prompt thoughts on the nature of evil.
2. The poem is set principally in the Biafran war, although this is not mentioned explicitly (in an obvious way).
3. The second part of the poem refers explicitly to the Second World War.
4. By implication/suggestion the poem is relevant to all human conflict.
5. The poem begins with a graphic and unpleasant description of a pair of vultures who nestle lovingly together after feasting on a corpse.
6. The poet comments on the strangeness of love existing in places where one would not expect.
7. 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.
8. The ending/conclusion of the poem is ambiguous/two sided. On one hand, Achebe praises God and providence that even the most cruel 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.

## **FORMS AND TECHNIQUES:**

1. Free verse in three sections separated by an **ellipsis** (three dots...)
2. The ellipsis(three dots...) and the tab in from the margin show a change in thought or perspective on the poet's part.
3. The second section is itself in two parts again separated by an ellipsis.
4. There is a logical structure: (a) observation (b) reflection (c) further example (d) general reflection.
5. The poem goes from descriptive to reflective back to descriptive and then reflective again in terms of the style and structure.
6. The opening mood is grim/gloomy.
7. Line 1-**greyness**-suggests a dull start to the poem
8. Line 2-3-**drizzle of one despondent/dawn**-the grimness is emphasised by the use of alliteration in the 'd'.
9. Line 3-**harbingers**-people or things that announce the approach of someone or something.
10. Lines 5-6-**broken/bone**-alliteration running on two lines for impact.
11. Line 9-**bashed-in head**-description of the vultures' heads-suggests something that has been damaged or harmed.
12. Lines 9-13-**a pebble/on a stem rooted in/ a dump of gross/feathers, inclined affectionately/to hers**-this is a **metaphor** describing the vultures. It conveys (puts across) an image of something disgusting. Their affectionate gestures/actions towards each other is unexpected in this context, after such a gross description of them.
13. Lines 11, 14, 19 and 20-**gross...swollen...hollowed...cold**-these are negative adjectives associated with the activities of the vultures.
14. Lines 13-17-**Yesterday they picked/the eyes of a swollen/corpse in a water logged/ trench and ate the/things in its bowel**. Again another grotesque image is associated with the vultures, this time it is not their appearance rather what they do.
15. Line 22-**Strange**-reflection on something us suggested by the use of the word 'strange' as if the poet is stopping to think.
16. Line 26-**charnel house**- a building where corpses and bones are placed.
17. Line 27-**coil up**-this conjures up the image of a snake-again another vulgar image.
18. 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.
19. Line 30-...**Thus the Commandant at Belsen**-the language here is almost Biblical. A Commandant was a German officer in charge of a camp or unit.
20. **Belsen** is the name of a WWII Nazi 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.
21. Line 33-**human roast**-refers to the victims in the concentration camp as if they were being cooked (Belsen). This is a shocking phrase, very visual and descriptive.
22. 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.

23. Lines 39-40-**Daddy's/return**-an ordinary domestic/homely image is used to suggest the father's love.
24. Line 41-42- **Praise bounteous/providence**-more Biblical language talking about all the good things God gives to mankind.
25. Line 43-**ogre**-a type of monster-here it represents evil and the glow worm represents love.
26. Lines 43-47-**that grants even an ogre/a tiny glow worm/tenderness encapsulated/in icy caverns of a cruel/heart**-the contrast in the final section between the glow worm and ogre suggest that evil is bigger than love. This is a powerful image that shows us the glow worm (love) becoming enclosed/encapsulated in the icy caverns of the ogre's (evil) heart.
27. Line 46-**icy caverns of a cruel**-alliteration used for impact-sharp sounds.
28. Line 49-**kindred**-related by blood, close family, the same.
29. Line 50-**perpetuity**-the state of continuing forever.
30. Lines 47-51-**or else despair/for in the very germ/of that kindred love is/lodged the perpetuity/of evil**-this final section of the poem is one of despair as Achebe believes that the evil will continue forever even if there is the potential for love in the same being.
31. 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.

### **THEME AND INTERPRETATION:**

1. Achebe is fascinated by the fact that creatures that love can also carry out acts of great evil OR creatures that carry out acts of great evil can also love.
2. He suggests at the end of the poem that these two factors may be more closely linked to each other than most people think.
3. There is a fine line between love and hate.

### **LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE:**

1. The poem is written in free verse with lines of different lengths. The lines are short so we read the poem slowly and appreciate its full of horrors.
2. It is divided into four sections. Each is marked by an indented line rather than a new stanza, perhaps to stress the logical flow of ideas. There is minimal punctuation to continue the flow of the poem.
3. The title is again deceptive/misleading like The Night of the Scorpion. This poem does begin with a cold and repulsive image of the vultures. We soon realise that they are symbols of evil and their main purpose is to introduce the theme of evil in the poem.
4. The description of the vultures is in the **past tense**, whereas the Belsen Commandant is described in the **present continuous tense**, perhaps to show us that evil is all around us now.
5. The concentration camp commandant cannot escape the evil deeds he has just committed that day. ...**the fumes of human roast [cling] rebelliously to his hairy nostrils** (Line 32). The word roast makes us think of food and it is even more repulsive/disgusting that he buys chocolate for his child on the way home.

## **IMAGERY AND SOUND:**

1. The opening of the poem is dark. The **greyness** (Line1) is heightened by the heavy alliteration in **drizzle of one despondent dawn** (Line2) and even by the approaching **sunbreak** (Line4) does not lift the atmosphere.
2. There are metaphors of horror and death. The **dead tree** (Line6) branch which the vultures roost on is described as a **broken bone** (Line5).
3. The male vulture's **bashed in head** is a **pebble on a stem** (Line9) and its body is a **dump of gross feathers**. (Line11)
4. In the second section the vultures love leads the poet on to think about the nature of love.
5. Love is **personified** as a woman finding a place to sleep. She is **in other ways so particular** (Line23) and hard to please, yet strangely she chooses to sleep with the vultures, **that charnel house** (Line26). Yet why does she sleep with her face **to the wall**(Line 28)? Is it to avoid seeing what is really there?
6. The Belsen Commandant-the mass murderer is called Daddy. Achebe uses this word as it brings the man back to someone we would associate with children, thus making his actions at work even more horrifying.
7. In the fourth section the poet uses more **metaphors**. The evil Commandant is seen as an ogre with a tiny spark of love inside him, which is the glow worm. These images are clichéd but Achebe is wanting to say that he is saying nothing new-that there will always be love and evil in the world.
8. The **germ** of love does not seem to grow as a normal seed would because of the **perpetuity of evil** (Line 50) is bound up with it and prevents it from developing. Germ here refers to something like a seed rather than a germ of disease.
9. Alliteration is used throughout the poem for impact.