Village People
by Bessie Head

A short story analysis
Compiled by JO Alkaster
• What do you see in the picture?

• What does this cartoon tell us about the man’s attitude towards change?

[Source: https://kikuyunationalism.files.wordpress.com]

• What is the message of this cartoon?
Poverty has a home in Africa – like a quiet second skin. It may be the only place on earth where it is worn with an unconscious dignity. People do not look down at your shoes which are caked with years of mud and split so that the toes stick out. They look straight and deeply into your eyes to see if you are friend or foe. That is all that matters. To some extent I think that this eye-looking, this intense human awareness, is a reflection of the earth all about. There is no end to African sky and to African land. One might say that in its vastness is a certain kind of watchfulness that strips man down to his simplest form. If that is not so, then there must be some other, unfathomable reason for the immense humanity and the extreme gentleness of the people of my village.

Poverty here has majority backing. Our lives are completely adapted to it. Each day we eat a porridge of millet in the morning; a thicker millet porridge with a piece of boiled meat at midday; and at evening we repeat breakfast. We use our heads to transport almost everything: water from miles and miles, bags of corn and maize, and fire wood.

This adaptation to difficult conditions in a permanently drought stricken country is full of calamity. Babies die most easily of starvation and malnutrition: and yet, within this pattern of adaptation people crowd in about the mother and sit, sit in heavy silence, absorbing the pain, till, to the mother, it is only a dim, dull ache folded into the stream of life. It is not right. There is a terrible mindlessness about it. But what alternative? To step out of this mindless safety, and face the pain of life alone when the balance is heavily weighted down on one side, is for certain to face a fate far worse. Those few who have, are insane in a strange, quiet, harmless way: walking all about the village, freely. Only by their ceaseless muttering and half-clothed bodies are they distinguishable from others. It is not right, as it is negative merely to strive for existence. There must be other ingredients boiling in the pot. Yet how? We are in the middle of nowhere. Most communication is by ox cart or sledge. Poverty also creates strong currents of fear and anxiety. We are not outgoing. We tend to push aside all new intrusions. We live and survive by making as few demands as possible. Yet, under the deceptive peace around us we are more easily confused and torn apart than those with the capacity to take in their stride the width and the reach of new horizons.

Do we really retain the right to develop slowly, admitting change only in so far as it
keeps pace with our limitations, or does change descend upon us as a calamity? I merely ask this because, anonymous as we are, in our favour is a great credit balance of love and warmth that the Gods somewhere should count up. It may be that they overlook desert and semi-desert places. I should like to remind them that there are people here too who need taking care of.

**The old woman**

She was so frail that her whole body swayed this way and that like a thin stalk of corn in the wind. Her arms were as flat as boards. The flesh hung loosely, and her hands which clutched the walking stick were turned outwards and knobbled with age. Under her long dress also swayed the tattered edges of several petticoats. The ends of two bony stick-legs peeped out. She had on a pair of sand-shoes. The toes were all sticking out, so that the feet flapped about in them. She wore each shoe on the wrong foot, so that it made the heart turn over with amusement.

Yet she seemed so strong that it was a shock when she suddenly bent double, retched and coughed emptily, and crumbled to the ground like a quiet sigh.

‘What is it, Mmm? What is the matter?’ I asked.

‘Water, water,’ she said faintly.

‘Wait a minute. I shall ask at this hut here if there is any water.’

‘What is the matter?’ they asked.

‘The old lady is ill,’ I said.

‘No,’ she said curtly. ‘I am not ill. I am hungry.’

The crowd laughed in embarrassment that she should display her need so nakedly. They turned away; but old ladies have no more shame left. They are like children. They give way to weakness and cry openly when they are hungry.

‘Never mind,’ I said. ‘Hunger is a terrible thing. My hut is not far away. This small child will take you. Wait till I come back, then I shall prepare food for you.’

Then, it was late afternoon. The old lady had long passed from my mind when a strange young woman, unknown to me, walked into the yard with a pail of water on her head. She set it down outside the door and squatted low.

‘Good-day. How are you?’ I said.

She returned the greeting, keeping her face empty and carefully averted. It is possible to say: what do you want? Whom are you looking for? It is impossible to say this to a carefully averted face and a body that squats quietly, patiently. I looked at the sky, helplessly. I looked at the trees. I looked at the ground, but the young woman said nothing. I did not know her, inside or out. Many people I do not know who know me, inside and out, and always it is this way, this silence.

A curious neighbour looked over the hedge.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked.

I turned my eyes to the sky again, shrugging helplessly.

‘Please ask the young woman what she wants, whom she is looking for.’
The young woman turned her face to the neighbour, still keeping it averted, and said quietly:

‘No, tell her she helped our relative who collapsed this morning. Tell her the relatives discussed the matter. Tell her we had nothing to give in return, only that one relative said she passes by every day on her way to the water tap. Then we decided to give a pail of water. It is all we have.’

Tell them too. Tell them how natural, sensible, normal is human kindness. Tell them, those who judge my country, Africa, by gain and greed, that the gods walk about her barefoot with no ermine and gold-studded cloaks.

**Summer sun**

All day long I lie asleep under the thorn tree, and the desert is on this side of me and on that side of me. I have no work to do. We are all waiting for the rain, as we cannot plough without rain. I think the rain has gone away, like last year. We had a little rain in November, but December has gone, and now it is January; and each day we have been sitting here, waiting for rain: my mother, my grandmother and my grandfather, my cousin, Lebenah, and my sister and her little baby. If it were to rain my grandfather would push the plough and my cousin Lebenah would pull the oxen across the great miles of our land. We women would follow behind, sowing maize, millet, pumpkin and watermelon seed.

I feel great pity for my family, and other families. I wonder why we sit here like this. Each day the sun is hot, hot in the blue sky. Each day the water pool of November rain gets smaller. Soon we will have to leave the land and return to the village.

In the village we have a politician who takes the people up on the hill to pray for rain. He wears a smart suit and has a big black car and a beautiful deep African voice. His mind is quick and moves from one thing to another. He can pray, and cry, and speak politics all at once. People always expect the rain to fall the minute after he has stopped praying and crying. They call him the one who has shaken God loose.

Actually, I have not been sleeping the whole day. I am trying to learn English. My cousin Lebenah tells me that things are changing in Africa, and that it is necessary for women to improve themselves. I love my cousin Lebenah so much that I do anything he tells me to do. He tells me that English is the best language to learn, as many books have been written in English, and that there is no end to the knowledge that can be gained from them. He gave me a geography book and I have read it over and over. I am puzzled and afraid. Each year the sun is more cruel. Each year the rain becomes less and less. Each year more and more of our cattle die. The only animal that survives is the goat. It can eat anything and we eat the goat. Without the goat, I do not know what we would do. It is all about us, like the family. It has the strangest eyes. They are big and yellow, and the pupil is a black streak right across the yellow ball of the eye.

I am trying to improve myself too, as I am very afraid that I may have an
illegitimate baby like my elder sister. My family will suffer much. And the child too. It may die. There is never enough food and we are always hungry. It is not so easy for a woman to have too many babies when she has improved her mind. She has to think about how she will feed the baby, clothe it, and wash it. My sister’s baby is lovely, though. He laughs a lot for no reason at all.

My geography book makes me wonder and wonder. It tells me that water is formed by hydrogen and oxygen. I wonder so much about that. If we had green things everywhere, they might help to make the oxygen to make the rain. The soil is very fertile. If there is only a little rain, green things come out everywhere, and many strange flowers. How can we live like this? Here are our bags with the seeds of maize, and millet, and the land is hard as stone.

Tomorrow the sun will rise, quietly. The many birds in the bush will welcome it. I do not. Alone, without the help of rain it is cruel, killing and killing. All day we look on it, like on death. Then, at evening, all is as gentle as we are. Mother roasts goat meat over the coals of the wood fire. Sister feeds her baby. Grandfather and cousin Lebenah talk quietly to each other about little things. The stars spread across the sky and bend down at the horizon. The quiet talk of grandfather and cousin Lebenah seem to make earth and heaven come together. I do not know what we would do if we all did not love one another, because tomorrow the sun will rise again.
Setting

- A rural area in Botswana

Characters

- The first person narrator
- The old woman – ill
- The young woman – a relative of the old woman – grateful for kindness shown to her relative

Summary:

This short story consists of three essays in which the writer discusses and illustrates the effects of poverty in rural Botswana.

In the introductory essay the writer personifies poverty as an inhabitant who has settled down comfortably (‘has a home’) in Africa. Poverty has become so closely associated with Africa that the writer compares it to a “quiet second skin”. People have become so accustomed to their suffering that it is almost regarded as normal, even to the extent where it is “worn with unconscious dignity”. The suffering has had a positive impact on the people of Africa. They emerge as people with “immense humanity” and “extreme gentleness”. The infant mortality rate is high as “babies die most easily of starvation and malnutrition”. The African people appear to be resistant to change. The writer questions whether Africans have the right to develop at their own slow pace and within their own limitations.

In the next essay the narrator assists an old woman who collapses because of a lack of water. The family gives her a gift, a pail of water, for assisting their elderly relative. This gift, a precious commodity in a drought-stricken Botswana, is a show of gratitude for the narrator’s “human kindness”.

The final essay illustrates the family's plight due to the intense heat and lack of rain. No ploughing or planting can take place, however, there is no lack of love.

Figures of Speech

- **Personification** – “Poverty has a home in Africa”
- **Simile** – “like a quiet second skin” – Poverty has become closely associated with Africa
- **Metaphor** – “worn with an unconscious dignity” – People have accepted poverty as the norm
- **Irony** – people are unconsciously proud of being poor – Rich in “immense humanity” and “extreme gentleness”
- **Irony** – Poverty has “majority backing” – support from the majority
- **Pun** – “We use our heads”
  - Literal = Carrying goods on the head
  - Figurative = Being wise; thinking things through
  - **Pun - “We use our heads ...”**
- **Rhetorical Question** – “Do we really retain the right to develop slowly admitting change only in so far as it keeps pace with our limitations, or does change descend upon us as a calamity? The writer questions Africa’s reluctant attitude towards change. Do the people of Africa really desire change, or are they content in their state of poverty?

Themes

- Poverty/ drought
- Infant mortality
- Starvation and malnutrition
- Poor communication
- Fear and anxiety
- Fear of change
- exploitation
- survival
- Human kindness
- Human kindness
CONTEXTUAL QUESTIONS

Read the extracts below and answer the questions set on each. The number of marks allocated to each question serves as a guide to the expected length of your answer.

EXTRACT A

Babies die most easily of starvation and malnutrition: and yet, within this pattern of adaptation people crowd in about the mother and sit, sit in heavy silence, absorbing the pain, till, to the mother, it is only a dim, dull ache folded into the stream of life. It is not right. There is a terrible mindlessness about it. But what alternative? To step out of this mindless safety, and face the pain of life alone when the balance is heavily weighted down on one side, is for certain to face a fate far worse. Those few who have, are insane in a strange, quiet, harmless way: walking all about the village, freely. Only by their ceaseless muttering and half-clothed bodies are they distinguishable from others. It is not right, as it is negative merely to strive for existence. There must be other ingredients boiling in the pot. Yet how? We are in the middle of nowhere. Most communication is by ox cart or sledge. Poverty also creates strong currents of fear and anxiety. We are not outgoing. We tend to push aside all new intrusions. We live and survive by making as few demands as possible. Yet, under the deceptive peace around us we are more easily confused and torn apart than those with the capacity to take in their stride the width and the reach of new horizons.

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1. Using your OWN words, describe the difficulties infants face in Africa. (2)

2. 2.1 Quote no more than SIX consecutive words from the extract to prove that the following statement is TRUE:

   African communities are very supportive. (1)

   2.2 What effect does the community’s support have on the pain the mother experiences? Quote ONE word from the extract to support your answer. (2)

3. Explain what the writer means by: ‘There must be other ingredients boiling in the pot’. (line 9) (2)

4. Refer to lines 10 – 15, (‘We are in the middle … reach of new horizons.’)

   Using your OWN words, describe the lifestyle of the village people. State THREE points. (3)

5. Refer to lines 16 – 18, (‘I merely ask … should count up’).

   Identify and discuss the theme evident in these lines. (3)

6. Discuss your views on why the world’s tendency to ‘overlook desert and semi-desert places’ (lines 18 – 19), is unacceptable. (4)
EXTRACT B

Then, it was late afternoon. The old lady had long passed from my mind when a strange young woman, unknown to me, walked into the yard with a pail of water on her head. She set it down outside the door and squatted low.

‘Good-day. How are you?’ I said.

She returned the greeting, keeping her face empty and carefully averted. It is possible to say: what do you want? Whom are you looking for? It is impossible to say this to a carefully averted face and a body that squats quietly, patiently. I looked at the sky, helplessly. I looked at the trees. I looked at the ground, but the young woman said nothing. I did not know her, inside or out. Many people I do not know who know me, inside and out, and always it is this way, this silence.

A curious neighbour looked over the hedge.

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‘Please ask the young woman what she wants, whom she is looking for.’

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Tell them too. Tell them how natural, sensible, normal is human kindness. Tell them, those who judge my country, Africa, by gain and greed, that the gods walk about her barefoot with no ermine and gold-studded cloaks.

1. Briefly explain the purpose of the young woman’s visit. (2)

2. 2.1 What emotion is the narrator experiencing in line 13 when she is ‘shrugging helplessly’? (1)

2.2 Give a reason for your answer to QUESTION 3.1. (1)

3. Refer to line 22, (‘those who judge my country, Africa, by gain and greed’). (1)

3.1 Who are ‘those’ people referred to in this line? (1)

3.2 Using your OWN words, describe the young woman’s attitude towards the people mentioned in line 22. (2)

4. Refer to lines 17 – 20, (‘No, tell her … all we have.’) (4)

4.1 Before these lines the young woman has difficulty speaking. Why does she speak now? (2)

4.2 Identify and discuss a theme of the short story which is evident in these lines. (4)

5. The ‘pail of water’ is an appropriate show of gratitude for the narrator’s assistance. Discuss your views on this statement, (3)
I am trying to improve myself too, as I am very afraid that I may have an illegitimate baby like my elder sister. My family will suffer much. And the child too. It may die. There is never enough food and we are always hungry. It is not so easy for a woman to have too many babies when she has improved her mind. She has to think about how she will feed the baby, clothe it, and wash it. My sister’s baby is lovely, though. He laughs a lot for no reason at all.

My geography book makes me wonder and wonder. It tells me that water is formed by hydrogen and oxygen. I wonder so much about that. If we had green things everywhere, they might help to make the oxygen to make the rain. The soil is very fertile. If there is only a little rain, green things come out everywhere, and many strange flowers. How can we live like this? Here are our bags with the seeds of maize, and millet, and the land is hard as stone.

Tomorrow the sun will rise, quietly. The many birds in the bush will welcome it. I do not. Alone, without the help of rain it is cruel, killing and killing. All day we look on it, like on death. Then, at evening, all is as gentle as we are. Mother roasts goat meat over the coals of the wood fire. Sister feeds her baby. Grandfather and cousin Lebenah talk quietly to each other about little things. The stars spread across the sky and bend down at the horizon. The quiet talk of grandfather and cousin Lebenah seem to make earth and heaven come together. I do not know what we would do if we all did not love one another, because tomorrow the sun will rise again.

1. 1.1 What is an ‘illegitimate baby’? (lines 1 – 2) (1)
   1.2 Explain why the following statement is TRUE.

   The birth of an ‘illegitimate baby’ has had a negative impact on the narrator’s family life. State TWO points. (2)

2. How is the baby’s innocence conveyed to the reader? (2)

3. Refer to lines 7 – 12, (‘My geography book … hard as stone’).

   3.1 From your knowledge of the story, explain why the narrator is reading a geography book. (2)

   3.2 What do these lines suggest about the narrator’s character? State TWO points. (2)

   3.3 Identify the figure of speech in lines 11 – 12. (1)

   3.4 Explain how this figure of speech contributes to the meaning of these lines. (2)

4. Why does the narrator not welcome the rising of the sun? (line 13) (2)

5. ‘Love’ plays a vital role in this short story. Discuss your opinion on this statement. (3)
**Suggested answers**

**EXTRACT A**

1. There is a high infant mortality rate ✓ due to hunger/ famine/ undernourishment. ✓ (2)

2. 2.1 “people crowd in about the mother” ✓
OR
“credit balance of love and warmth” ✓ (1)

2.2 It makes the pain more bearable. ✓
“absorbing”/ “dim”/ “dull” ✓ (2)

3. There are other solutions ✓ to Africa’s problem of poverty. ✓ (2)

4. People are terrified/ distressed. ✓
Anti-social. ✓
Adverse to change. ✓
Cope without making demands. ✓
Easily upset / shattered ✓

**NOTE:** Accept ANY 3 of the above. (3)

5. Human kindness ✓

Africa people love and support fellow Africans in times of need. This is a coping mechanism in stressful times which are caused by the effects of poverty. This quality is common to the people of Africa. ✓ ✓

**NOTE:** ONE mark for identification and TWO marks for explanation. Accept a relevant text-based explanation. (3)

6. Open-ended.

Accept a relevant response which shows an understanding of the following aspects, among others:

- Starvation and hunger – the effects of drought and poverty
- Fair treatment for people from all nations is needed to effect change
- Support for African nations from First world countries
- Racism and prejudice towards African nations (4)

**EXTRACT B**

1. To thank the narrator ✓ for helping the old woman/ her relative ✓ (2)

2. 2.1 confused/ uncertain/ helpless ✓ (1)

2.2 She does not know what the young woman wants/ She isn't saying anything ✓ (1)

3. 3.1 People from wealthy nations/ proud, judgemental people ✓ (1)

3.2 She is annoyed ✓
angry ✓
thinks they are proud/ arrogant ✓
distances herself from them ✓

**NOTE:** Accept any TWO of the above. (2)
4. 4.1 She is embarrassed to speak to the narrator/ ashamed by her gift, a pail of water, ✓ but she feels free to speak to the neighbour. ✓
4.2 Human kindness/ poverty ✓

   The young woman shows her gratitude for the narrator’s show of human kindness to the old woman, a relative of hers. Due the drought and extreme poverty a pail of water is all her family can afford to give. ✓✓✓

   **NOTE:** ONE mark for identification and THREE marks for explanation. Accept a relevant text-based explanation.

5. Open-ended.

   Accept a relevant response which shows an understanding of the following aspects, among others:
   - Drought – a pail of water is a precious commodity
   - Their willingness to express their gratitude
   - Water – could be regarded as a sacrifice
   - Did not put in much effort to fill a pail with water
   - Could be regarded as an insult

**EXTRACT C**

1. 1.1 Born out of wedlock. ✓

   1.2 Her family suffered much. ✓

   The child could die. ✓

   Shortage of food/ hunger ✓

   Difficulty taking care of the baby ✓

   **NOTE:** Accept any TWO of the above.

2. The baby is ignorant the suffering of the family. ✓

   The baby laughs in spite of the suffering. ✓

3. 3.1 She wants to improve her education.

   She wants to learn English.

   Cousin Lebenah gave her a Geography book to read.

   **NOTE:** Accept any TWO of the above.

3.2 She is determined. ✓

   Dedicated. ✓

   Analytical/ intelligent ✓

   **NOTE:** Accept any TWO of the above.

3.3 Simile ✓

3.4 It shows how serious the drought is ✓/ how dry the soil was ✓/ how harsh conditions were ✓/ how difficult it is to succeed in Africa ✓

   **NOTE:** Accept any TWO of the above.

4. It is not accompanied by rain. ✓ It is the start of another dry/ hot day. ✓

5. Love for family/ fellow human beings/ Supporting each other is the only way to cope/ survive the harsh African conditions. ✓✓✓