

Francis Slater
Lament for a Dead Cow
Easier questions to cut your teeth on!

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Francis Carey Slater was born near Alice in 1876, the grandson of an 1820 settler. He received some of his schooling at Lovedale College, a seminary about 13 kilometres from Alice that had been created as early as 1841 to educate black children but which did at times enrol the occasional white child. Carey's formative years in the Alice area were at a time of great hardship for the rural community. The young poet was therefore deeply immersed in the tragedy of disease and drought -- the theme of this poem.

Upon leaving the college, he took up work with the Standard Bank -- a pre-eminent institution in the Eastern Cape -- where he rose eventually to the position of manager at the Graham's Town branch. Upon taking early retirement, he moved to Cape Town but maintained his link with the Eastern Cape as his source of inspiration while he continued to perfect his poetic skills.

Slater is regarded as the first English-speaking South African to write real poetry rather than simple verse. He grew up with the African people, and wrote of them "as he knew them, with familiarity and conviction". His poetry has been described as having "real inventiveness" and "a sensual awareness of his subjects that lead to the coining of fresh images". It is said that he often evoked "a uniquely South African experience by image and rhythm".

He died in 1958 at the age of 82.

GENERAL QUESTIONS:

1. What is a lament? (2)
2. This poet makes much use of similes in this poem.
 - What is a simile? How does a simile differ from a metaphor? (4)
 - Why is a simile better in the context of this poem than, say, a metaphor? (4)
3. List FOUR words in this poem which depict a specific South African flavour. (4)
4. "Siyalila, siyalila, inkomo yetu ifile!"
 - What do these words mean? (2)
 - Why would the poet want to begin his poem with a Xhosa quotation? (2)
5. "Her horns were as sharp as the horns of the new moon
That tosses aloft the evening star."
 - What is the "evening star"? (4)
 - Why does the poet connect the sharp horns of the moon with the evening star? (4)

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