

Sydney Clouts
Karoo Stop
More challenging questions!

Worksheet by:
Keith Tankard
Knowledge4Africa.com

Sydney Clouts was a South African poet. He was born in Cape Town in 1926 and educated first at the South African College School and then at the University of Cape Town where he obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1950. He worked in an insurance company and then as bookseller before moving into the publishing world where he became editor for the International Press Agency in Cape Town. In 1961 he relocated to London, where he would remain -- apart from an occasional visit to South Africa.

He began to write poetry in the 1950s and these were printed in South African magazines. They had limited readership, however, which meant that he failed to receive any immediate recognition. Although Clouts wrote few poems, he is nevertheless remembered as one of the most creative of South African poets. Indeed, in 1968 he received both the Olive Schreiner and the Ingrid Jonker prizes for poetry. He was married and had three sons, but died in 1982 at the age of 56.

His poem -- "Karoo Stop" -- recalls a vivid memory of a very long coal train passing them while his passenger train was halted in a karoo siding. The poet uses several interesting devices to present the length of the coal train and the monotony of its rolling past them. He also plays with many words which rhyme with "coal". Can you work out why?

1. "A whole
trainful of coal
like a soul
burnt black in a hole
or tunnel, passed us slowly.
We were halted in our carriage.
The roll, roll, roll, roll, roll, roll, roll,
dragged painfully, each truck like the goal
achieved, yet still this kept control
of each eye."
 - What is the purpose of using all these words which rhyme with "coal"? (4)
 - Why would the trainful of coal be "like a soul burnt black in a hole or tunnel"? (4)
 - In what way would the rhythm of the words "like a soul burnt black in a hole" fit the purpose of this poem? (4)

2. "We were halted in our carriage."
 - Why would the poet be "halted"? (4)
 - Why the use of the plural "we" and "our"? (2)

3. "The roll, roll, roll, roll, roll, roll, roll,
dragged painfully, each truck like the goal
achieved, yet still this kept control
of each eye."
 - Comment on the repetition of "roll". (4)
 - Why is each truck "like the goal achieved"? (4)
 - In what way had the trucks "still . . . kept control of each eye"? (4)

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