

Mafika Gwala
One Small Body Longs for Summer
More challenging questions!

Worksheet by:
Dr Keith Tankard
Knowledge4Africa.com

It's July -- and therefore mid-winter in South Africa. A small boy is getting very bored because he is cooped up in the tiny township house, not being allowed outside because of the cold. He watches his mother as she boils water on the stove to make coffee. He day-dreams of being a soldier, then his attention is brought back to reality by his father dropping the newspaper. Finally he drinks his coffee while wishing it was summer and he could go outside to play.

SOME NOTES ON THE POEM

This is a very simple but graphic poem -- yet it shouldn't tax one in any way. There are no hidden meanings, and certainly no great nuances.

STANZA 1:

Mother is busily occupied at the coal stove in a very small kitchen. Indeed, it is so small that she has room only to slide around. Conditions are most cramped for the boy, causing him to jab his elbow accidentally into his younger brother's leg. The kitchen is also not big enough to allow them to sit far from the stove so that the heat pierces his body right through -- "into the marrow".

STANZA 2:

The kettle boils. It's a singing kettle and its noise reminds the boy of a song -- or perhaps the kettle is shaped not unlike a bomb? As a result, the boy's imagination is set in motion. He remembers a picture he has seen of war and he thinks of being a soldier. His father then joins them in the kitchen, dropping the newspaper on the table. The noise draws the boy's attention back to reality. His father looks stern -- "staring coldly round". Although he seems to be grinding his teeth, the boy decides that it's because his father has backed the wrong horse in the July Handicap and has therefore possibly lost money.

STANZA 3:

The steam from the boiling kettle rises to the ceiling, touching it softly -- "kisses the ceiling" -- before disappearing. The mother pours the water while it is still boiling rapidly -- "the violent waters". Notice how the mother is said to be very tender in her actions -- and there are indications that she is very concerned for the boys' welfare. How does one know this? The boy expresses his sense of boredom, wishing that he could go outside to play, wishing that winter would end. He also wishes he could have fun in the house but he fears that even just a little thing as laughter would disturb his father in such a small house. He decides, however, that even biting the walls would be better than doing nothing.

IMAGERY

The poet never says that the house is tiny but there are many indications of this. Can you point them out? He also makes much use of ONOMATOPAIEA: the kettle "hisses", "sings" and "purrs". Are there other examples?

TONE

The poet is expressing TOTAL BOREDOM and FRUSTRATION. The domestic scene he describes is completely trivial -- boiling water to make coffee -- but it's the sum total of the boy's world in winter.

1. Why should the mother, in picking up the kettle, set the boy to thinking about being a soldier? (4)

2. What image is created of the mother in this poem? Explain your answer by referring to content and poetic techniques. (4)

3. "Mother picks it up
with an almost tender care.
Sets me thinking of a war-picture
The actor carefully setting the charge
and smiling all the time."
 - What do these lines tell you about the atmosphere that existed in the kitchen? Explain your answer carefully. (4)

4. How attentive is the boy to what is going on around him? Explain your answer by referring to content and / or poetic techniques. (4)

5. Consider the title -- "One Small Boy Longs for Summer" -- in the light of the poem as a whole.
 - What does this title communicate about the speaker's feelings? (4)

6. It has been said that the poet -- Mafika Gwala -- was a revolutionary.
 - Is this attitude reflected in any way in this poem? (4)

7. This poem may be described as simple but meaningful.
 - Do you agree? Explain. (10)

8. What word BEST describes the tone of this poem? Give reasons for your answer. (4)
 - A. sadness
 - B. euphoria
 - C. boredom
 - D. frustration.

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