

VULTURES - CHINUA ACHEBE

SUMMARY

- The poem begins with a graphic and unpleasant description of a pair of vultures who nestle lovingly together after feasting on a corpse. This prompts thoughts on the nature of evil.
- The second section shows the rebellious nature of love and how love always will be present.
- The third section focuses on 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.
- The poet comments on the strangeness of love existing in places where one would not expect. The final section ruminates on how even in the most evil person, love can take shape.
- The ending/conclusion of the poem is ambiguous/two sided. On one hand, Achebe praises God and providence that even the cruellest of creatures can show love. On the other hand, these creatures show love for their families only and continue to commit cruel acts towards others.

Stanza 1

Line 1

greyness – This creates a depressing start to the poem. A very dull and lifeless atmosphere is created. Sets tone of despair, gloom.

Line 2-3

drizzle of one despondent/dawn – the grimness is emphasised by the alliteration of the 'd'. This adds to the gloomy mood. *drizzle* - this emphasises the miserable scene.

despondent dawn – personification reinforces the gloomy atmosphere.

Line 3

unstirred – there is no movement - emphasising the lack of activity

harbinger -One who foreshadows or is a forerunner of things to come.

harbingers of sunbreak – usually, birds announce the arrival of dawn. However, that day was so depressing that even the birds were quiet.

Lines 4-6

dawn is supposed to be a symbol of a new beginning, but the presence of the vultures negates this positive association. Vultures are associated with evil. This creates a sinister atmosphere.

They are sitting on the '*broken bone of a dead tree*'. This metaphor suggests that the tree is like a carcass itself, and its bare, bleached branches are like bones that have been picked clean by the vultures. This also conveys an image of a violent death, thus emphasising the evil nature of the vulture. They feed on death, and their presence seems to cover their environment in a deathly shroud.

Lines 7-8

nestled close to his mate – we don't associate vultures with love. Vultures symbolize death and decomposition. The poet tells us that these symbols of death and evil, who eat the decaying corpses, can have a loving side. This image of love contrasts with their evil nature.

Lines 8-9

bashed-in head – another image of violence that creates a terrifying/ugly picture of them.

Lines 9-13

a pebble/on a stem rooted in/ a dump of gross/feathers, inclined affectionately/to hers –

The metaphor of the pebble is appropriate, as the vulture's head is small in comparison to its body, and the adjectives '*dump*' and '*gross*' emphasise that the bird is ugly/disgusting.

Yet, his head is '*inclined affectionately to hers*', – the attraction between the pair of vultures is clear to see.

Their affectionate actions towards each other is unexpected in this context, after such an ugly description of them.

Lines 13-21

Yesterday they picked/the eyes of a swollen/corpse in a water logged/ trench and ate the/things in its bowel –

Achebe gives an extremely distasteful description of how the vultures had, the day before, fed on a dead animal. The phrases '*picked the eyes*' and '*swollen corpse*' are disgusting, and Achebe goes on to relate that the birds ate the contents of the animal's intestines too. They had then had their fill, or were '*full gorged*', and settled on a branch. What remained of the corpse is described as a '*hollow remnant*' which the vultures observed with '*cold telescopic eyes*'.

'*cold telescopic eyes*' – emphasises that their eyes are devoid of emotion. This gives them an evil, robot-like quality.

'*picked the eyes*' – their actions were deliberate, emphasising their gross nature and lack of emotion

STANZA 2

Line 22

Strange – reflection on something is suggested by the use of the word '*strange*' as if the poet is stopping to think. The word emphasises that the poet cannot reconcile the two sides of the vultures and his inability to understand the fickleness of love.

Lines 23-26

"*Love*" seemingly needs certain conditions to grow and yet "*Love*" can also grow and thrive in circumstances where it seems impossible, amongst creatures/ people who seem incapable of love. *charnel house* – Achebe contrasts the '*light*' of love with the "*dark*" of death by mentioning that in this darkest of environments, the '*charnel-house*', a storage place for corpses, love is present.

Line 27

coil up – this conjures the image of a snake – another association with evil.

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. Love is able to stay in such an evil place. It is a sharp contrast to the rotting corpse and death mentioned in the first section of the poem.

This idea marks a shift in the poem's focus, away from the vultures. The second section ends, however, with the remark that if this happened, love's face would be '*turned to the wall*', presumably to avoid the sight of skeletal remains. *Love* is personified as a woman. The poet is emphasising that love makes people/creatures turn a blind eye to the evil nature of their partner.

The exclamation mark at the end emphasises that love can't stand to look at the atrocities contained within.

STANZA 3

Line 30

The ellipsis links the vultures with the commandant of Belsen. This section of the poem focuses on the Commandant of that camp as he leaves at the end of a day.

Thus the Commandant at Belsen – Achebe identifies *the charnel house* as the Belsen 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. Josef Kramer was tried for crimes against humanity and hung for this on 13 December 1945.

Line 33

human roast – refers to the victims in the concentration camp as if they were being cooked This is a shocking phrase, very visual and descriptive. Achebe's description of him stresses the thoroughly unpleasant side.

Lines 33-34

'*clinging rebelliously*' suggests that the smell refuses to go away even after the Commandant has left the camp. He tried unsuccessfully to get rid of it. He may have washed but the smell still clings to him.

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.

Lines 35-40

In line 35, Achebe shows a different side to the Commandant, just as he demonstrated the affection between the pair of vultures. He describes how this repulsive man will stop at a sweet-shop on his way home to buy some chocolate for his children. He creates a different picture of this "demonic" man who has children who he spoils and loves and who are anxiously waiting for his arrival. Just as with the vultures, love is not affected by evil.

The children are referred to as '*his tender offspring*', and he is their '*Daddy*'.

Here, Achebe creates a feeling of a loving family; the children are probably blissfully unaware of what their father's work involves. They await his homecoming and he enjoys bringing them a treat at the end of the day.

Daddy's/return – an ordinary domestic/homely image is used to suggest the father's love.

STANZA 4

In the fourth stanza Achebe presents us with two alternative conclusions to draw from the behaviour of the vultures and the Commandant.

He suggests that we might '*Praise bounteous providence*', and the phrase '*if you will*' suggests that this is the alternative he would prefer us to choose.

Line 41-42

Praise bounteous/providence – Give thanks for God's blessings

Line 43

Ogre – a type of monster – here it represents evil.

glow worm represents love.

Lines 43-47

that grants even an ogre/a tiny glow worm/tenderness encapsulated/in icy caverns of a cruel/heart –

Metaphor – This image describes the element of love that lights up, like a *glow worm*, the Commandant's otherwise despicable life. He is emphasising that even such a cruel person is capable of love.

This love is '*encapsulated / in icy caverns of a cruel / heart*': Achebe uses another metaphor to convey how cold the Commandant's heart is. This suggests that evil will overwhelm love.

Line 46

icy caverns of a cruel – alliteration used for impact-sharp sounds. God even gives a cruel monster like the Commandant of Belsen a small touch of kindness, love and humanity. But it is covered in the recesses of his heart and cannot break free. His heart/ natural inclination is towards cruelty.

Line 49

Kindred – related by blood, close family, the same.

Line 50

perpetuity of evil – suggests that evilness is enduring, everlasting

Lines 47-51

or else despair/for in the very germ/of that kindred love is/lodged the perpetuity/of evil – the final section of the poem is one of despair as Achebe believes that evil will continue forever even if there is the potential for love in the same being.

germ refers to something very small, microscopic – this emphasises that evil overpowers love

Themes

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 love cannot stop evil.

Tone

Identify the tone in each stanza. Substantiate and explain how this reflects the mood.

Conclusion

- The vultures, described in such a disparaging; grim fashion could be construed as a metaphor for the people responsible for the atrocities in Belsen and in particular the Commandant.
- It is the longest part of the poem and this is not a coincidence.
- The first stanza is a metaphor for the Commandant's predominant personality traits and this is why it dominates so much of the poem's content.
- The third stanza, the scene with his child, represents a far smaller portion of the poem and this is a metaphor for his spark of humanity.
- The form of this poem is very clever as it creates a grim and deathly image, it creates a glimmer of hope in the second and third stanzas and then ends on a hopeless and fatalistic note emphasising the futility of the situation.
- Difference between the vultures and the commandant: Vultures feed on corpses. That is their instinct. It is not something that they choose to do. The Commandant is not acting on instinct. He has the ability to choose. He chooses to be evil.

Questions

- What comparison is Achebe trying to draw between the vultures and the Commandant? Give evidence for your response. (4)
- Why does the poet place love in a Charnel House? What point is he trying to make? (3)
- The concluding lines (41-51) offer options for human behaviour. Do you agree? Justify by referring to imagery and diction. (3)
- What theme is being introduced by the juxtaposition of the phrases "inclined affectionately to hers" and "picked the eyes of a swollen corpse"? (2)
- What does the phrase "cold telescopic eyes" (lines 20, 21) suggest about the vulture's feelings toward their prey? Explain your answer. (3)
- How is love personified in the second stanza? Quote three phrases to support your answer. (4)
- What effect is created by referring to the Commandant as 'daddy' and mentioning the purchase of chocolate for his children? (3)
- Does the speaker believe that love conquers evil? Substantiate your answer. (3)
- Explain how lines 1-3 contribute to the mood of the first section. (2)
- What do the words '*cold telescopic eyes*' suggest about the nature of the vultures? (2)
- Discuss the significance of the description in lines 30-35 in the context of the poem. (3)