

Refugee Mother and Child

No **Madonna and Child** could touch
that picture of a **mother's tenderness**
for a **son** she **soon** would have to **forget**.

The air was heavy with odours
of **diarrhoea** of unwashed **children**
with **washed-out ribs** and **dried-up**
bottoms **struggling** in laboured
steps behind blown **empty** bellies. Most
mothers there had **long** ceased
to care but not this one; she held
a **ghost** smile between her **teeth**
and in her eyes the **ghost** of a **mother's**
pride as she combed the **rust-coloured**
hair left on his **skull** – and then ;
singing in her **eyes** – began carefully
to part **it** ... In another life this
would have been a little **daily**
act of no consequence before his
breakfast and school; now she
did it like putting flowers
on a tiny **grave**.

Chinua Achebe

Comment [B1]: Reference to Mothers and Children – the supposed strong bond of love between a mother and her child. Also, how much this character in particular won't display that it's a lost battle with her son.

Comment [B2]: STRUCTURE! = after 'forget' there is a break in the poem. The break could be there to signify that the next part of the poem is going to be different. 'Forget' foreshadows the eventual death of the child and suggests that stanza two will contrast with the gentle caring image we have been given in stanza one. The pause in the poem along with the word 'forget' makes for a dramatic effect about going back to an earlier time that would have to be erased from the mother's memory.

TONE = the tone of voice of the first part of the poem is soft, longing and possibly regretful / wistful

VERSE LENGTH = The short length creates a strong impact because the few words are better remembered, short lines later on also suggest the factual, inevitable, unavoidable, definite death of the child

Comment [B3]: Physical description of the dying children, creates a sense of emptiness and desperation – life in the refugee camps is a bitter 'struggle' for survival, which most lose.

Comment [B4]: The sentence is very long and makes up five lines creating the feeling that there is an unending list of things that are wrong with the children and many ways in that they are sick.

Comment [B5]: Contrasting references to time. In the first part, there is 'soon' which gives the sense that time is running out. The second reference to time is 'long' which describes the situation – the suffering has been going on for a long time. Most mothers had given up with this a long time ago and had just resigned from motherhood and hope.

Comment [B6]: The use and repetition of the word ghost triggers the reader to think of thinness, wasting away and also something that used to be alive but has died.

Comment [B7]: she doesn't have enough to sing. She is "half-singing"

Comment [B8]: Another very long sentence. The sentence goes into a lot of detail when describing a normal morning routine because it matters to this mother and child so much more because the child is dying. We can see how much the mother appreciates every single little detail about her child because she wants to absorb as much of her child as she can. The '...' also means that the sentence hasn't ended yet. This eliminates an abrupt end and tone. It introduces a flowing tone for the poem.

Comment [B9]: SIMILE -> comparing a normal morning routine to putting flowers on a grave is a morbid and depressing comparison. The reason Achebe used this comparison might be to lead the reader to where all these battles end. They end in death. The full stop at the end puts a definite ending to the poem and to the story. Also when you put flowers on a grave, you do it slowly and carefully and you try not to cry. This is an excellent way to describe how carefully and gently the mother is combing her child's fragile barely existent hair.