

Cattle in the rain - Musaemura Zimunya

Summary

The speaker says that we think terrible situations will never end when they are happening, but they always end at some point.

This poem describes the physical and emotional suffering a shepherd went through while looking after cows in rural Zimbabwe. The shepherd has grown up, and is now telling his story in retrospect (looking back). The poet says 'used to'. This tells us that the story happened in the past.

Back then, the boy thinks his terrible job will never be over. It has been raining for a long time, and the boy feels that he is not properly prepared: he has no raincoat – only an old sack. The cattle do not want to obey him, and their resistance to his efforts makes his job harder. He even wishes he was a girl so he wouldn't have to do this kind of work. (Girls worked the land and boys herded the cattle.) He is so exhausted by the physical effort of trying to herd the cattle that he cries.

The poem shows us how lonely the shepherd feels. The shepherd feels that the cattle are deliberately (on purpose) making his work harder by refusing to co-operate (work with him). When a wasp comes, the whole herd stampedes (runs away fast) and scatters in different directions. The shepherd realises that he needs help to herd them again, but everyone else is sheltered in their homes, out of the rain. Only he is there, and he has to rely on himself. He is tense, demoralised (feels like giving up) and frightened. Even though he controls the most difficult bull, Gatooma, at last, he knows that he will have to keep doing this very difficult job day after day.

Vocabulary

WORD	BASIC DEFINITION
penetrating	Penetrating means pushing through. The cattle don't go where he wants them to go. They just push through the thin bush and go where they like.
skelter	A heter-skelter is a children's slide on a playground. The poet means that the cattle are playful and unorganised. The word also sounds like 'scatter'. The cattle are all over the place instead of together in one neat, obedient herd.
stampede	A stampede is when cattle panic and then rush madly. It is very dangerous to get in their way because you can be trampled to death. The wasp has made the animals panic and run away because they don't want to be stung.

Figurative language

Metaphor

A metaphor directly compares two things to see how they are the same. There is usually one literal (physical, actual, real) meaning, and one figurative or deeper meaning.

- A. 'a bone of anger blocking my breath' (line 34) tells us that the poet is so angry and frustrated with the cattle that he feels as if he is choking. It seems as if there is a bone stuck in his throat and he cannot breathe.
- B. 'pebbles of water' (line 12) tells us that the water is hard when it pelts the boy. It feels heavy and hurts him, like real pebbles (little stones) feel when someone throws stones at your head.
- C. 'his ghost of silent disapproval shattering to your mind' (line 23) tells us that the boy feels as if the ox is judging him negatively. You can't touch a ghost, but it is still frightening. The boy feels threatened and afraid when the silent ox looks at him. He feels so anxious that his mind is 'shattered'. We usually say 'shatter' when we describe breaking glass. Here it means that the boy is fragile and the ox's disapproving look badly disturbed his thoughts (shattered them).

Alliteration

This is a word-sound device when words share the same hard consonant, usually at the beginning.

- A. 'cry and curse' are hard/k/sounds that help us to imagine how desperate the boy felt. When you curse, you say swearwords to vent your frustration.
- B. 'hooves hammering' helps us to picture and hear the stampede of the cattle. The repetition of the/h/sound copies (mimics) the way their feet strike the wet earth. It is a heavy, tense, frightening feeling or atmosphere.

Onomatopoeia

This is a word-sound device when the word has the actual sound inside it. The word is the sound that the thing makes. 'hooves hammering': The word 'hammering' sounds like the animals running fast as they stampede. It is a heavy, repetitive sound. It helps us to feel, see and hear how heavily and fast the cattle were moving.

Speaker

The speaker of the poem is not always the poet.

Who is narrating (telling) the event/s of this poem, and how do you know?

The speaker is probably the poet, Musaemura Zimunya, himself.

Evidence:

- A. He uses 'I' and 'we', first-person (eyewitness) narration, so we can infer that he was there, and is speaking about his personal experiences.
- B. The poet says 'The rain used to soak us' (line 3). From this we can infer that he has made himself a character in his poem. The poem is a narrative: it tells the story of his childhood experience herding cattle.

Setting

When and where a poem or story takes place.

When we understand the setting of a poem, we are better able to form pictures in our minds of what the poem looks like.

Where does this poem take place? How do you know?

Pastures outside the kraal of the boy's (unnamed) village or town.

Evidence:

A. Line 3: From 'in the pastures' we can infer that the boy is with his cattle outside his village, in the rural countryside.

B. Line 5: From 'would not be driven to the kraal' we can infer that there is a place where the cattle stay (the kraal), which is part of the village.

Mood and tone

Mood is the feeling created by a poem.

The tone is the way in which a writer expresses the mood.

We must look at the words the speakers use to create the feeling/mood/tone of the poem.

The **mood** of the poem is contemplative (thinking) and reflective at the beginning, when the adult speaker looks back at his childhood job. He can talk about it now in a calm way. But the mood/atmosphere is different in the actual retelling of the events. Back then, when he is experiencing the stampede, the terrible weather, and the stinging insects and thorns, the boy's tone is miserable and frustrated.

Tone - frustrated, frightened/panicked, and resigned.

Evidence:

A. Frustrated: Lines 6 and 7: 'It made me cry and curse sometimes/and I used to wish I was born for the skirt' we can infer that the shepherd hates his job so much that he wishes he was a girl. Girls had different chores to do, such as farming and cooking. Line 6 tells us he was 'cursing' (swearing because he was angry) and line 27 tells us he was frustrated by the 'maddening' rain.

B. Frightened/panicked: Like the cattle, the shepherd is made 'frantic' by the stampede (line 16) and has lost control of the herd.

C. Resigned: Lines 18 and 19: 'And the rain does not cease/and the cows just go on.' we can infer that the shepherd knows he has to keep doing this job. He has resigned himself to it (given up hoping it will change).

Theme

A. Nature versus humans: The boy is trying to control the wayward herd in the rain. The rain makes him feel miserable and defeated.

B. Isolation versus community: The boy knows that his cries for help will go unheard, and that he must handle the animals alone.

Questions

1. Refer to 'they would not be driven to the kraal/.../and I used to wish I was born for the skirt' (lines 5–8):

1.1 Choose the correct answer to complete the following sentence. Write only the letter (A-D) next to the question number (1.1).

The poet wrote 'Cattle in the rain' to make the reader... (1)

A criticise the shepherd's life.

B sympathise with the shepherd's life.

C feel entertained by the shepherd's life.

D be angry at the shepherd's life.

1.2 Explain what the poet means by '...I used to wish I was born for the skirt'. (1)

1.3 Explain why he would want what he wishes in 1.3 above. (2)

1.4 In your opinion, would this change make a big difference to his life? Why or why not? (3)

2. Refer to 'chugging after the rhythmic hooves hammering the earth' (line 35):

2.1 Identify the onomatopoeia in this line. (1)

2.2 Explain how the onomatopoeia works in this line. (1)