



The Old Chief Mshlanga by Doris Lessing

ABOUT THE STORY

The Old Chief Mshlanga is a short story set in Africa at a time when large parts of it were colonised by Britain. The story is about the daughter of British settlers who live on a farm in the middle of Africa. Although many native Africans work for her family, she does not really know them and is ignorant about their language, culture and traditions. One day she meets an old man called Chief Mshlanga, who is the chief of a local village. She realises that the land she lives on used to be his country – it used to belong to his people before the white settlers came. She discovers that the Chief's son works for her family, so one day decides to follow him back to the village to see the Chief.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Doris Lessing (1919–2013) was a British writer who wrote novels, poems, plays and short stories. She was born in Iran but spent much of her childhood in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). At the age of 15, she started writing short stories and selling them to magazines. She was very active politically and much of her writing is based on her experiences of life in Africa, and the problems of colonialism. She won many awards in her lifetime, and is the oldest person to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature (in 2007).

Deliberately I set myself to think of this village I was seeking, and what I should do when I entered it – if I could find it, which was doubtful, since I was walking aimlessly and it might be anywhere
5 in the hundreds of thousands of acres of bush that stretched about me. With my mind on that village, I realized that a new sensation was added to the fear: loneliness. Now such a terror of isolation invaded me that I could hardly walk;
10 and if it were not that I came over the crest of a small rise and saw a village below me, I should have turned and gone home. It was a cluster of thatched huts in a clearing among trees. There were neat patches of mealies and pumpkins and
15 millet, and cattle grazed under some trees at a distance. Fowls scratched among the huts, dogs lay sleeping on the grass, and goats friezed a kopje that jutted up beyond a tributary of the river lying like an enclosing arm around the village.

20 As I came close I saw the huts were lovingly decorated with patterns of yellow and red and ochre mud on the walls; and the thatch was tied in place with plaits of straw.

This was not at all like our farm compound, a
25 dirty and neglected place, a temporary home for migrants who had no roots in it.

And now I did not know what to do next. I called a small black boy, who was sitting on a log playing a stringed gourd, quite naked except for the strings of
30 blue beads round his neck, and said: 'Tell the Chief I am here.' The child stuck his thumb in his mouth and stared shyly back at me.

For minutes I shifted my feet on the edge of what seemed a deserted village, till at last the child
35 scuttled off, and then some women came. They were draped in bright cloths, with brass glinting in their ears and on their arms. They also stared, silently: then turned to chatter among themselves.

I said again: 'Can I see Chief Mshlanga?' I saw they
40 caught the name; they did not understand what I wanted. I did not understand myself.

At last I walked through them and came past the huts and saw a clearing under a big shady tree, where a dozen old men sat cross-legged on the
45 ground, talking. Chief Mshlanga was leaning back against the tree, holding a gourd in his hand, from which he had been drinking. When he saw me, not a muscle of his face moved, although I could see he was not pleased: perhaps he was afflicted with my
50 own shyness, due to being unable to find the right forms of courtesy for the occasion. To meet me, on our own farm, was one thing; but I should not have come here. What had I expected?

VOCABULARY FOCUS

aimlessly (line 4): without any particular purpose or plan

crest of a small rise (line 10): the top of a small hill

cluster (line 12): a small group of things that are very close to each other

mealies (line 14): corn

millet (line 15): a type of grain

fowls (line 16): chickens

friezed (line 17): formed a line up

kopje (line 17): a small hill

jutted (line 18): stuck out

ochre (line 22): a brown-yellow colour

glinting (line 36): shining with quick flashes of light

gourd (line 46): the shell of a hard fruit

afflicted (line 49): suffering from



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Before reading

1a You are going to read a story set in colonial Africa called *The Old Chief Mshlanga*. Work in pairs and answer the questions.

- 1 What do you understand by 'colonial Africa'?
- 2 Who do you think 'The Old Chief Mshlanga' is?

1b Read *About the story* and check your answers.

2 The story is set in rural Africa. Work in the same pairs and brainstorm what you think it is like there. Think about the following points:

- the environment
- what life is like for a British settler
- what life is like for a native African person.

While reading

1 Read the text. Choose the correct options to complete the sentences. Find evidence in the text to support your answers.

- 1 The girl knows/doesn't know where she is going.
- 2 She has been/hasn't been to the village before.
- 3 She knows/doesn't know what to do when she arrives in the village.
- 4 The small boy fetches/doesn't fetch the Chief for her.
- 5 The women understand/don't understand her question.
- 6 The Chief is/isn't happy to see her.

2 Read the text again and answer the questions.

- 1 How does the girl feel when she is trying to find the village? Why do you think she feels like that?
- 2 What differences does the girl notice between the villagers' houses and her own home?
- 3 How is the girl greeted by the boy and the women in the village? Why do they greet her like this?
- 4 Why does the girl think the Chief is not pleased to see her?
- 5 What does the girl realise at the end?

3 Look at the words and phrases used to describe the scene. Complete the table with words and phrases from the extract.

the surroundings	
the animals	
the village	
the huts	

4 Using your completed table in the previous exercise to help you, answer the questions below.

- 1 What words and phrases does the girl use to describe her journey to the village? What does this tell us about her life there and how she feels about the area?
- 2 Think again about the different settings described in the extract: the protagonist's farm, the village and the open country. How does the author create different atmospheres?
- 3 The author uses some long and complex sentences, especially when describing the landscape. Look at the first sentence of the extract. What effect does this have on the reader?

After reading

1 Discuss the questions in groups.

- 1 What feelings does the girl experience during this whole episode? Think about her feelings whilst trying to find the village, as she arrives in the village, and after she meets the Chief.
- 2 Look at the description of the village in *While reading* 3. Do you think it's a nice place? Why/Why not?
- 3 Do you agree with the girl's view of why the Chief isn't pleased to see her? Can you think of any other reasons why he might not be pleased?
- 4 The girl's reason for coming to the village is never stated. Why do you think she came?

2 Imagine you are the girl. Follow the instructions below.

- 1 Think about what you have learned from your experience. Make some notes on what you have learned about yourself as a British settler in Africa, and also about the native African people.
- 2 Write a diary entry describing the episode. Use words and phrases from *While reading* 3 and your ideas in *After reading* 1 to describe the scene and your feelings. Use your notes from the previous question to say what you have learned from this experience.