



The Old Chief Mshlanga by Doris Lessing

Before reading

- 1 Put students into pairs to answer the questions, then ask them to read *About the story* to check their answers.

Answers

- 1 'Colonial Africa' is Africa when it was controlled or governed by the British.
- 2 'The Old Chief Mshlanga' is an old man who is the chief of a village of native African people.
- 2 In the same pairs, students brainstorm what they think life in rural Africa is like. Encourage them to make notes for each of the points listed.

i CULTURAL INFORMATION

At the time of this story, Britain and other countries had colonised a large part of southern and eastern Africa. The imperialist countries believed they were doing this for a worthy cause, to bring technological advancement and European values to African countries. In rural areas, white settlers took land belonging to the native Africans and established their own farms. The native Africans were employed by them but no longer had any rights to what was once their land, and could be moved off it at any time. The native Africans often resented white settlers but relied on them for jobs. White settlers often did not speak their language or understand their traditions, but relied on their knowledge of the land. For these reasons the two sides were obliged to maintain a relationship, albeit an often uneasy and difficult one.

While reading

- 1 Students read the text quickly. Before they do the exercise, ask what person the story is written in (first person) and who the narrator is (the daughter of the British settlers). Students then choose the correct options. When you check answers, elicit the parts of the text that gave the answers.

Answers

- 1 doesn't know (*I was walking aimlessly and it might be anywhere*)
- 2 hasn't been (*this village I was seeking*)
- 3 doesn't know (*And now I did not know what to do next.*)
- 4 doesn't fetch (*at last the child scuttled off, and then some women came*)
- 5 don't understand (*they did not understand what I wanted.*)
- 6 isn't (*I could see he was not pleased*)
- 2 Students read the text again and answer the questions.

Answers

- 1 She feels frightened and lonely, probably because she doesn't know where she's going and also she's going into a new situation, where she will be a stranger.
- 2 The villagers' huts are decorated in bright colours, whereas the girl's home is dirty and neglected.
- 3 They just stare at her, probably because they don't usually see white people in their village and also because they probably don't understand her.
- 4 She thinks it's because he's shy and doesn't know what to do in the situation.
- 5 She realises she should never have come.
- 3 Students find words and phrases from the text to describe the scene.

Answers

the surroundings: *hundreds of thousands of acres of bush that stretched about me; crest of a small rise*
the animals: *cattle grazed; fowls scratched; dogs lay sleeping; goats friezed a kopje* **the village:** *cluster of thatched huts; neat patches of mealies and pumpkins and millet* **the huts:** *lovingly decorated*

- 4 Students answer the questions, looking in more detail at the language and style in the extract and focusing more on the descriptive language.

Possible answers

- 1 *walking aimlessly, hundreds of thousands of acres of bush:* it tells us she hasn't got to know the land around where she lives very well; the description of her surroundings is very flat – she doesn't have a very high opinion of the surrounding land.
- 2 Lessing describes the white settler's farm as a 'compound', closed off from the outside world, 'dirty' and 'neglected', as though it is not loved or cared for properly. By contrast, the Chief's village is organised, planted, and the huts 'lovingly decorated', which gives an impression that the village is cared for and a safe and cosy place. The atmosphere is more relaxed – children wander around, the women sit together chatting. The open country is big and beautiful but also lonely and dangerous. The girl projects her own feelings onto it, realising her own vulnerability.
- 3 The complex sentences reflect the girl's thoughts and help build suspense. The first sentence reflects the fact that the girl feels lost within the vast landscape.



After reading

- 1 Students work in groups to discuss the questions.

Suggested answers

- 1 She feels nervous at first, with a growing realisation as she arrives and meets the Chief that she is a stranger and does not belong there.
- 2 Yes – despite the Africans being poor, it is well cared for and brightly decorated. It seems like a peaceful place with the animals sleeping or grazing, and also friendly, with the villagers chattering.
- 3 The girl thinks the Chief is not pleased to see her as he is shy and cannot think of how to greet her; in reality, he is probably displeased as it is not the 'done thing' for a white girl to visit a native African village.
- 4 Students' own answers.

- 2 Students imagine that they are the girl in the extract and work alone to make notes about what she has learned about herself and the native Africans. Students then write their diary entry. They should describe what happened in their own words, describing how they felt and what they learned from the experience.