

FIRST DAY AFTER THE WAR - MAZISI KUNENE

SUMMARY

- Mazisi Kunene wrote much of his poetry in South Africa, in the time of apartheid, a period in which black people were discriminated against and oppressed. His poem describes the joy that people felt at the ending of this system of government.
- The poem lists a number of ways in which the people celebrate the news. The news is so wonderful that we see how people of all types celebrate together and 'held hands with a stranger'
- The metaphorical wedding is the creation of a new society brought about by the struggle.

Line 1

We heard the songs of a wedding party.

metaphor – our country is compared to a new bride. A wedding marks the start of a new life for her. Similarly, it is the start of a new chapter for South Africa.

songs – suggest happiness, celebration

wedding party – unity: families come together

we – Includes the reader in the action and ideals expressed in the poem. This emphasises that it was a widespread celebration.

Line 2

We saw a soft light

soft light – Figuratively: symbol of hope/optimism. Literally: Dawn/ early morning. Just as sunrise marks the start of a new day, this was the start of a new era.

Tone – peaceful, calm

Line 3

Coiling round the young blades of grass

Metaphor –

Lines 2 - 3

Metaphor – the poet compares the happiness of the young married couple to light on new grass. The married couple are young like fresh, new growth of grass.

young blades of grass – This suggests a new dawn, a fresh new start for South Africa.

Lines 4 - 5

At first, we hesitated, then we saw her footprints,

Her face emerged, then her eyes of freedom!

Hesitated suggests disbelief, doubt: They could not believe that their dream of being free has finally been realised.

Personification – freedom is described as having footprints, a face and eyes. Kunene portrays democracy as a character. Democracy is feminised by the pronoun "her".

footprints – they have not seen/experienced freedom yet; they have seen evidence of it.

face emerged – the reality of freedom became clearer as they saw more evidence of it.

eyes of freedom – could suggest the innocence of freedom

Lines 6-7

*She woke us up with a smile saying,
'What day is this that comes suddenly?'*

Personification of freedom continues – compared to a mother awakening her children.

Metaphor – the poet compares South Africa under the oppression of apartheid to a long sleep. Democracy/freedom awakens the country out of its apartheid sleep.

There is a gradual unveiling of “the bride”: Footprints, face, eyes. Ties in with the gradual emergence of freedom which took time to achieve.

with a smile - the welcoming nature of freedom.

Day – refers to the dawn of democracy – day of the first democratic elections.

What day is this – they cannot believe that they are free

Suddenly – they gained their freedom sooner than expected.

Line 8

We said, 'It is the first day after the war'.

war –refers to the struggle against apartheid. The poet identifies the “we” as those who had been involved in the struggle.

Metaphor – apartheid is compared to war. War is unjust and innocent lives are lost. Apartheid was unjust and many lives were lost.

Line 9

Then without waiting we ran to the open space

They were free to vent their emotions

open space – symbolic of freedom. They were no longer restricted as under apartheid.

Lines 10-11

Ululating to the mountains and the pathways

Calling people from all circles of the earth.

Onomatopoeia – the pronunciation of the word ‘ululating’ imitates actual ululating. Ululating is a loud, shrill cry of sorrow or of rejoicing. In this case, it is the sound of rejoicing one hears at a wedding celebration.

Metaphor – the ululating is compared to an announcement or celebration of freedom. It is heard by all so that all will celebrate the freedom from apartheid.

circles of the earth – refers to all the tribes and language groups on the earth – emphasises unity, everyone celebrates together. The news was so momentous that all the world had to know and celebrate with them.

Line 12

We shook up the old man demanding a festival

shook up – unsettled

old man – older generation were in disbelief. The old man refers to the elderly who had been subjected to apartheid for many years. A festival is demanded because they now have the freedom that they were previously denied. They need to celebrate their freedom.

Line 13

We asked for all the first fruits of the season.

Repetitive form of line structure – this emphasises their overwhelming joy, prompting an unrestrained physical response.

Alliteration - *first fruits of* - The f consonant sound suggests an overflowing / abundance of crops/ fruit – emphasising their complete freedom.

first fruits of the season – is a religious offering of the first agricultural produce of the harvest. This was an expression of gratitude for God's blessings. They want to show their gratitude for their newly gained freedom. This was necessary after the hardships they had experienced during the oppressive apartheid regime.

Line 14

We held hands with a stranger

This line suggests a reconciliatory action.

Black and white were strangers – apartheid separated people on the basis of their skin colour.

Lines 12 – 15: lists various ways that people celebrated the end of apartheid. There was a variety of actions and widespread jubilation.

Lines 15-16

We shouted across the waterfalls

People came from all the lands

We shouted – eagerness to convey the news to all

Waterfalls – symbolic of a barrier. Freedom transcended all barriers.

people came – emphasises unity, they responded positively

lands – emphasises unity. Previously, apartheid had divided the people. The announcement of the advent of democracy is shared with all neighbouring countries/ across borders.

Line 17

It was the first day of peace.

repetition of “first day” to emphasises that it was the start of a new era.
peace – emphasises unity

Line 18

We saw our Ancestors travelling tall on the horizon

The “Ancestors” are present and by being present, they show their acceptance and support of the events that have taken place and the celebrations being held. Their ancestors finally find their rest from the oppression that they were subjected to. They are relieved and travel in the spirit world with pride (*travelling tall*).

The spirits of the African ancestors are known as amadlozi and they play a very important role in the lives of their living descendants.

They are also celebrating.

tone

Celebration, exhilaration, elation, delight, excitement, tranquillity/serenity

MOOD

Joyful

THEMES

- The sheer joy of people at the realization that they are free from apartheid
- Invitation to everyone to celebrate their freedom
- Sharing of the joy
- Triumph over oppression

QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the effectiveness of the analogy that underlies this poem. (3)
2. How does the poet show the gaining of freedom has been a gradual rather than a revolutionary process? (2)
3. Is the title “First Day After the War” apt? Discuss (3)
4. What do the people demand, both literally and figuratively? (4)
5. Discuss why, in your opinion, the “ancestors” are mentioned at the end of the poem? (3)
6. What is the message of this poem? Substantiate with reference to diction & imagery. (4)