



What does the phrase “squatting native vendors waiting in the dust” tell the reader?

A. We learn that the vendors sell their wares only to people who are on the train. The vendors are clearly waiting patiently for the train’s arrival. They have no other customers.



What image does “the sand became the sea” convey?

A. A sense of vastness is conveyed, giving the impression that the station is an island in a sea of sand.



What literary technique is used in the description of the train as it enters the station?

A. Personification is used in “The train called out along the sky,” and in “whisking a dwindling body behind it.”

Note the powerful impact of the first sentence.

What does the phrase “squatting native vendors waiting in the dust” tell the reader?

What image does “the sand became the sea” convey?

What literary technique is used in the description of the train as it enters the station?

The Train From Rhodesia

Nadine Gordimer

FOCUS: STREAM-OF-CONSCIOUSNESS TECHNIQUE

The train came out of the red horizon and bore down toward them over the single straight track.

The stationmaster came out of his little brick station with its pointed chalet roof, feeling the creases in his serge* uniform in his legs as well. A stir of preparedness rippled through the squatting native vendors waiting in the dust; the face of a carved wooden animal, eternally surprised, stuck out of a sack. The stationmaster’s barefoot children wandered over. From the gray mud huts with the untidy heads that stood within a decorated mud wall, chickens, and dogs with their skin stretched like parchment over their bones, followed the piccanins* down to the track. The flushed and perspiring west cast a reflection, faint, without heat, upon the station, upon the tin shed marked “Goods,” upon the walled kraal,* upon the gray tin house of the stationmaster and upon the sand, that lapped all around, from sky to sky, cast lit-

tle rhythmical cups of shadow, so that the sand became the sea, and closed over the children’s black feet softly and without imprint.

The stationmaster’s wife sat behind the mesh of her veranda. Above her head the hunk of a sheep’s carcass moved slightly, dangling in a current of air.

They waited.

The train called out along the sky; but there was no answer; and the cry hung on; I’m coming ... I’m coming ...

The engine flared out now, big, whisking a dwindling body behind it; the track flared out to let it in.



HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

serge — a durable twilled woollen or worsted fabric.

piccanins — (offensive) small black children.

kraal — a traditional African village of huts, typically enclosed by a fence.

1 Point out to students the subtle techniques used by Gordimer to create the setting. The fact that the dogs are malnourished indicates the extreme poverty of their owners.

Creaking, jerking, jostling, gasping, the train filled the station.

Here, let me see that one — the young woman curved her body further out of the corridor window. Missus? smiled the old boy, looking at the creatures he held in his hand. From a piece of string on his gray finger hung a tiny woven basket; he lifted it, questioning. No, no, she urged, leaning down toward him, across the height of the train, toward the man in the piece of old rug; that one, that one, her hand commanded. It was a lion, carved out of soft dry wood that looked like sponge cake; heraldic, black and white, with impressionistic detail burnt in. The old man held it up to her still smiling, not from the heart, but at the customer. Between its Vandyke teeth, in the mouth opened in an endless roar too terrible to be heard, it had a black tongue. Look, said the young husband, if you don't mind! And round the neck of the thing, a piece of fur (rat? rabbit? meerkat?*); a real mane, majestic, telling you somehow that the artist had delight in the lion.

All up and down the length of the train in the dust the artists sprang, walking bent, like performing animals, the better to exhibit the fantasy held toward the faces on the train. Buck,* startled and stiff, staring with round black and white eyes. More lions, standing erect, grappling with strange, thin, elongated warriors who clutched spears and showed no fear in their slits of eyes. How much, they asked from the train, how much?

Give me penny, said the little ones with nothing to sell. The dogs went and sat, quite still, under the dining car,

where the train breathed out the smell of meat cooking with onion.

A man passed beneath the arch of reaching arms meeting gray-black and white in the exchange of money for the staring wooden eyes, the stiff wooden legs sticking up in the air; went along under the voices and the bargaining, interrogating the wheels. Past the dogs; glancing up at the dining car where he could stare at the faces, behind glass, drinking beer, two by two, on either side of a uniform railway vase with its pale dead flower. Right to the end, to the guard's van, where the stationmaster's children had just collected their mother's two loaves of bread; to the engine itself, where the stationmaster and the driver stood talking against the steaming complaint of the resting beast.

The man called out to them, something loud and joking. They turned to laugh, in a swirl of steam. The two children careered over the sand, clutching the bread, and burst through the iron gate and up the path through the garden in which nothing grew.

Passengers drew themselves in at the corridor windows and turned into compartments to fetch money, to call someone to look. Those sitting inside looked up: suddenly different, caged faces, boxed in, cut off, after the contact of outside. There was an orange a piccanin would like ... What about that chocolate? It wasn't very nice ...

A young girl had collected a handful of the hard kind, that no one liked, out of the chocolate box, and was throwing them to the dogs, over at the dining car. But the hens darted in, and swallowed the chocolates, incredibly quick and accurate, before they had even dropped in the dust, and the

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

meerkat — a small southern African mongoose.

buck — here, antelope.

Why is the man "interrogating the wheels"?

What is implied by the phrase, "the garden in which nothing grew"?

What effect is achieved by comparing the artists to "performing animals"? How is this image extended?

Why are the passengers described as "suddenly different, caged faces, boxed in, cut off"?



What effect is achieved by comparing the artists to "performing animals"? How is this image extended?

A. The effect of the comparison is to dehumanize the artists. Sadly, the white people in the train do not think of them as wholly human. The effect is extended as the expressions and positions attributed to the wooden animals and warriors seem to be repeated in the motions and actions of the natives.



Why is the man "interrogating the wheels"?

A. He is clearly a railway official, inspecting the wheels before allowing the train to continue its run.



What is implied by the phrase, "the garden in which nothing grew"?

A. We become aware of the extreme poverty of the region.



Why are the passengers described as "suddenly different, caged faces, boxed in, cut off"?

A. The passengers are suddenly seen as zoo animals, cut off from the vibrant life outside. The difference between black and white, privileged and underprivileged, is clearly apparent.