



**Mycroft Lectures.  
Adapted Transcript for:**

**Chinua Achebe's  
*Refugee Mother and Child:***

**(Mycroft lectures always provide sentence-by-sentence parsing, paraphrasing and explanation of each poem. However, each lecture also presents extra information to enhance appreciation and understanding of the poem under discussion. As the Mycroft lectures are not read from a script, a transcript of a lecture contains the imperfections of a spoken presentation. To avoid the embarrassment of having the spoken performance thought to be an essay and being quoted as such, I have made occasional changes to the spoken lectures for the purposes of clarification. What follows is the transcript of a lecture, not an essay.)**

**Chronology of the Lecture.**

1. The background context of the poem is explained to situate the work.
2. The poem is read through.
3. The poem is parsed, paraphrased, explained line by line in simpler English. Various complications noted, or areas of interest raised and questioned, are:
4. An explanation of what a Madonna and Child painting is, with examples shown.
5. Why does the mother “have to forget” the child?
6. The description of the children in the camp.
7. Why the poem contains sentences that are very difficult to say.
8. How Achebe draws our attention to one character in the middle of the horror.
9. What is the “ghost smile?” The “ghost of a mother’s pride?”
10. The simile “like putting flowers on a tiny grave.”
11. Three possibilities for what “In another life” means.
12. The lecture then addresses why Achebe wrote a different version of the poem

tweaking a few lines in it.

13. The poem is read through again.
14. Achebe's rewritten version of the poem is then read through.
15. The changes in the poem are noted, specifically the way the title is changed when the poem is rewritten.

**From the lecture: "Refugee mothers are not born refugee mothers. They are mothers who become refugees."**

Additional Note:

Images shown during the description of the children in the camp may be disturbing.

## **Transcript of the *Refugee Mother and Child* Lecture.**

I am Dr Andrew Barker and this is the Mycroft Online Lecture on Chinua Achebe's *Refugee Mother and Child*. This poem was written in the late 60s, early 70s. It is about Chinua Achebe witnessing a refugee camp in Biafra, where a war was going on. Achebe looks over the refugee camp and sees this. It's a very affecting piece.

First reading of *Refugee Mother and Child* by Chinua Achebe.

*No Madonna and Child could touch  
that picture of a mother's tenderness  
for a son she soon would have to forget.*

*The air was heavy with odours  
of diarrhoea of unwashed children  
with washed-out ribs and dried-up  
bottoms struggling in laboured  
steps behind blown empty bellies. Most  
mothers there had long ceased  
to care but not this one; she held*

*a ghost smile between her teeth  
and in her eyes the ghost of a mother's  
pride as she combed the rust-coloured  
hair left on his skull and then -  
singing in her eyes - began carefully  
to part it...In another life this  
must have been a little daily  
act of no consequence before his  
breakfast and school; now she  
did it like putting flowers  
on a tiny grave.*

This is a wonderful poem, with some wonderful moments in it. I always feel a bit guilty when I'm teaching it, due to the horrific nature of the subject matter and me drawing attention to the way the emotions are created in us due to the way Achebe has written the poem, as if the form and the poetic talent of the writer is somehow what is creating the emotions in this, and not the horrific nature of the real incident that he is actually writing about.

But here's the poem.

*No Madonna and Child could touch  
that picture of a mother's tenderness  
for a son she soon would have to forget.*

A Madonna and child is a religious painting of Jesus Christ and Mary, his mother. And it's a generic painting. Basically during the time of the Renaissance, even after actually, when the Church controlled most of the funds allotted to the world's best painters, the painters were sort of obligated to paint the same things over and over again. So all the great Renaissance painters tended to paint religious paintings; Christ on the cross, lots of them do Last Suppers, and they all do one Madonna and child, one picture of Jesus Christ and his mother, the infant Christ and his mother.

And, there's only so much you can actually do with a picture of a child and a mother. Well, there's not actually, there's loads of things you can do with it, but if the child is supposed to be the deity incarnate that you either believe in, or that you are being paid to

show, you've got to have the mother's face looking at the child in awe, love, tenderness. You couldn't have a Madonna and child with Mary scowling down at the child as if she wants to say 'what an ugly baby you are'.

What Achebe is saying here is that the best painters the world has ever seen, painting a picture of a mother looking at her child, all of the best painters in the world, none of them have ever been able to capture the look of tenderness that he sees on this woman in a refugee camp.

*No Madonna and Child could touch  
that picture of a mother's tenderness  
for a son she soon would have to forget.*

And we must ask ourselves why. Why is it that no picture that's ever been painted by the best painters the world has ever seen could compare to this actual look of real, genuine, human tenderness that Achebe is looking at on this mother who will soon have to forget her child? Why will this mother soon have to forget her son? And I'll come back to that question in a minute, because as we read the poem through for the first time, we haven't been given enough information yet to understand the answer to that question; or to give the answer to that question. That's the first stanza of the poem.

The second stanza contains some very difficult sentences to say. Not particularly difficult to understand, I think. But deliberately difficult to say. The first sentence is this.

*The air was heavy with odours of diarrhoea of unwashed children with washed-out ribs and dried-up bottoms struggling in laboured steps behind blown empty bellies.*

Let's look at what the sentence means first. So, 'the air was heavy with odours'. The air stank. And it stank of diarrhoea. It stank of the 'diarrhoea of unwashed children', dirty children, 'with washed-out ribs'. 'Washed-out ribs' is a great piece of writing, and a horrific image. We have all seen these pictures now, time and time again, and too many times. These are pictures of children starving to death, whereby their stomachs become inflated, you can see their ribs through their skins. That's what Achebe is looking at here.

*The air was heavy with odours  
of diarrhoea of unwashed children*

*with washed-out ribs and dried-up  
bottoms struggling in laboured  
steps behind blown empty bellies.*

'Blown empty bellies' being the stomachs which have become inflated with air in these times of intense malnutrition. And the way that Achebe presents this sentence to us makes the sentence very difficult to read. It's as if he's giving us too much information. We've heard enough after the first two or three clauses, and he doesn't allow us a comma to stop, and he keeps forcing the extra information on us.

*The air was heavy with odours  
of diarrhoea of unwashed children  
with washed-out ribs and dried-up  
bottoms struggling in laboured  
steps behind blown empty bellies.*

And we're denied that final comma, and keep our breath in as we read this. And at the end, we are desperate to breathe out. One could even perhaps say the difficulty of reading this statement is analogous to, or at least an attempt to put us in mind of, the difficulty of the movement of the child.

Achebe continues:

*Most mothers there had long ceased  
to care but not this one.*

So, presumably as his eye roams over the situation that he sees, most of the mothers have long ceased to care. They have presumably ceased to care because they are too tired, too starving, too flat-out exhausted. 'Most mothers there had long ceased to care' is not an accusation against the mothers. It's a championing of this individual mother that he notices.

*Most mothers there had long ceased  
to care but not this one.*

What this line in the poem, or this part of the poem, always reminds me of is in the scene in *Schindler's List* with the brown/red coat. There's a saying that you can't mourn everyone, you

can only mourn someone. We need to be able to personify large events through one person and through that person, we can understand the suffering of a great many people. In *Schindler's List* we see the Nazis cleaning out the Warsaw, cleaning out - they're destroying the Warsaw ghettos, and Schindler notices a girl in a brown/red coat. The film is of course in black and white. And for four or five seconds, the camera follows his gaze as he notices this girl and then an hour and a half, probably two hours later in the film, he sees some Jewish people being burnt. And the Nazis have got the dead Jews in a wheelbarrow, and just upend the wheelbarrow, and we see the little girl there with the brown/red coat on. And it's a brilliant way of focusing our attention on the one person, through which the suffering of all the others is channeled.

Here, as Achebe looks over the Biafran refugee camp, his eyes focus on one mother.

*Most  
mothers there had long ceased  
to care but not this one; she held  
a ghost smile between her teeth  
and in her eyes the ghost of a mother's  
pride as she combed the rust-coloured  
hair left on his skull and then -  
singing in her eyes - began carefully  
to part it.*

So, the mother that Achebe concentrates on, 'She held a ghost smile between her teeth'. 'Ghost' is mentioned twice here. We get the '*ghost* smile between her teeth', and the '*ghost* of a mother's pride'.

She held a ghost smile between her teeth. A ghost smile? It could be the ghost of a smile, perhaps. A ghost is something that has died. A ghost is the spirit of something that has died, and the mother held the 'ghost smile between her teeth'. She was trying to smile but the living smile has died and has gone. Almost comically with this line I tend to imagine it as like a Tom and Jerry cartoon as well. You know when someone dies in a Tom and Jerry cartoon, and you see their spirit ascending from the body? I've always imagined this idea of, 'she held a ghost smile between her teeth', as if the smile is dead, and the ghost is ascending from her face and she's trying to hold it between her teeth. As long as it's still there, it gives her some sense of hope. I don't know if Achebe intends that, or how I'm supposed to see it,

but the image I get from that, the look on her face as I see that, it works quite well with the poem for me.

*She held a ghost smile between her teeth  
and in her eyes the ghost of a mother's pride.*

So, 'the ghost of a mother's pride,' it's there in her eyes. It's as if the mother's pride is not in her face anymore, and she hasn't got it anymore, but it's still there in her eyes. 'The ghost of a mother's pride.' It's dead but she's still got it; it has not left her yet.

*And in her eyes the ghost of a mother's pride  
as she combed the rust-colored hair left on his skull.*

What Achebe sees is the mother combing her dying or dead son's hair with a comb, and 'singing in her eyes'. Singing, we nearly always see it as positive. I mean, some people have got good voices, and some people have got bad voices; there are good songs, and there are bad songs. But whenever we hear singing rendered symbolically, (and of course it has to be rendered symbolically here, because you can't literally be singing in your eyes), we hear the singing as a positive, life affirming thing. What Achebe wants to put across here is that there is still some life in her eyes. 'Singing in her eyes'.

So, there she is. You can imagine this look on the mother's face as she parts her son's hair with the comb. And it's the comb, and the parting of the hair with the comb, that acts, in this poem, in the same way as the red-brown coat in *Schindler's List* does. It draws our attention, or it focuses the poet's attention, to this one instance.

We then get this final sentence, which I think is a really wonderful piece of poetic writing.

*In another life this  
must have been a little daily  
act of no consequence before his  
breakfast and school; now she  
did it like putting flowers  
on a tiny grave.*

So first off, the thing that she did, like 'putting flowers on a tiny grave'. What is the 'it' that she is doing? And the 'it' is combing her son's hair. She used to do this just before she sent her son to school. Now she did it 'like putting flowers on a tiny grave'.

I think this is such a good line firstly, because it works very well literally. Never mind the figurative beauty of it. If you can imagine the motions of putting flowers on a tiny grave, that is the same motion that you can imagine the mother combing the child's hair with. Obviously, she's combing his hair as a way of saying goodbye to him because he is dead.

Achebe tells us 'in another life this must have been a little daily act of no consequence before his breakfast and school'.

Now, what does he mean by 'in another life'? Because there's three possibilities for that.

In the first one, 'in another life', would be reincarnation, wouldn't it? The Buddhist belief in reincarnation, that our souls are born again. So, if the mother were to be born again, or had been born again in another life, this would be the sort of thing, this combing of the hair before the boy goes off to school, this would be this daily act of no consequence. That's what she would do in another life, a reincarnated life.

Another interpretation of that line 'in another life', is in a world properly run, where what has caused this situation to happen didn't happen. In a properly-run world. So it's almost, as if it means in another *world*, this would be a daily act of no consequence. And that's plausible.

But the one I think is most plausible and the one I like best is, in a world *before* this event happened. Because refugee mothers aren't born refugee mothers. They become refugees; mothers become refugees by whatever flood, war, whatever disaster, man-made or otherwise, has caused them to have to flee and seek refuge. So this refugee mother wasn't a refugee mother before the disaster of Biafra occurred. And the life that she led before that disaster was so different from the life that she leads now, it might as well have been another life. It happened to somebody else. And that's the, for me, most powerful reading of that line.

So, in the opening line we have in this,

*No Madonna and Child could touch  
that picture of a mother's tenderness  
for a son she soon would have to forget.*

And we can ask, 'why does the mother have to forget the child?' And one of the answers would be that the child is dead. Well, just because a child is dead doesn't necessarily mean you have to forget them. I think the reason she has to forget the child is that it is simply too painful for her to remember the child.

*No Madonna and Child could touch  
that picture of a mother's tenderness  
for a son she soon would have to forget.*

Because it's simply too painful to remember.

I'll read this poem through one more time, but then I'll give you another version of it with a few lines changed. This is Achebe's most famous poem; it's one that's often anthologised. I think perhaps when he wrote it as a young man, he didn't realize what a famous poem it was going to become. So, due to its fame, he rewrote it in a later anthology, tweaking two or three moments of it. I'll read this poem through as we know it, and as it is most commonly understood, and then briefly examine the changes that Achebe makes for the later version of the poem.

So this is the final read through of the first version of Chinua Achebe's poem, *Refugee Mother and Child*.

*No Madonna and Child could touch  
that picture of a mother's tenderness  
for a son she soon would have to forget.*

*The air was heavy with odours  
of diarrhoea of unwashed children  
with washed-out ribs and dried-up  
bottoms struggling in laboured  
steps behind blown empty bellies. Most  
mothers there had long ceased  
to care but not this one; she held  
a ghost smile between her teeth  
and in her eyes the ghost of a mother's*

*pride as she combed the rust-coloured  
hair left on his skull and then -  
singing in her eyes - began carefully  
to part it...In another life this  
must have been a little daily  
act of no consequence before his  
breakfast and school; now she  
did it like putting flowers  
on a tiny grave.*

This is the rewritten version of the poem:

*No Madonna and Child could touch  
Her tenderness for a son  
She soon would have to forget....  
The air was heavy with odours of diarrhoea,  
Of unwashed children with washed-out ribs  
And dried-up bottoms waddling in laboured steps  
Behind blown-empty bellies. Other mothers there  
Had long ceased to care, but not this one:  
She held a ghost-smile between her teeth,  
And in her eyes the memory  
Of a mother's pride....She had bathed him  
And rubbed him down with bare palms.  
She took from their bundle of possessions  
A broken comb and combed  
The rust-colored hair left on his skull  
And then humming in her eyes began carefully to part it.  
In their former life this was perhaps  
A little daily act of no consequence  
Before his breakfast and school; now she did it  
Like putting flowers on a tiny grave.*

So, of the changes there, we are given more information on the way the mother cleans

the child before combing his hair. We are told that she is humming in her eyes, where previously she had been singing. And this is important because we can hum in a much more melancholy way than we can be singing. And, the ambiguity in the final line about what 'in another life' could mean, is cleared up for us. Achebe tells us, 'in a former life'. Although I prefer the ambiguity of the different meanings, presumably Achebe doesn't and he wants us to know specifically that this woman he sees in the refugee camp, before she was there she was not a refugee mother. Refugee mothers aren't born as refugee mothers, and that particular confusion is cleared up for us, presumably because Achebe himself doesn't want that confusion.

But, I think the most telling difference that Achebe makes in his relatively slight rewriting of the poem is in the title. The poem that is most often anthologised is called *Refugee Mother and Child*. The rewritten version, the one I've just read you, is called *A Mother in a Refugee Camp*. Now, the reason he makes tis change, I think, is because to call someone a 'refugee mother' means she is a refugee before she is a mother. If you call the poem *A Mother in a Refugee Camp*, she is a mother who happens to be in a refugee camp. And the second title, to me, is much more respectful of the woman who is in those circumstances. She is a mother with a child, in a refugee camp; she isn't a refugee mother with a child.

That was the Mycroft Online Lecture for Chinua Achebe's *Refugee Mother and Child*, as it is often known, or the poem rewritten as *A Mother in a Refugee Camp*.

I am Dr. Andrew Barker. Thank you.

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## **Some Other Notes.**

1 'The air was heavy with odour of diarrhoea.' Can a smell be heavy? This is a literary technique that we call synesthesia. With synesthesia something associated with one sense is described in terms usually associated with one of the other four senses. A loud shirt is

perhaps the first that comes to mind. A shirt cannot literally be loud because it makes no sound, but we all know the type of shirt being referred to here. True, air cannot literally be heavy with odour, but we know exactly what he means.