

Description

The Coffee Plantation

Isak Dinesen

Isak Dinesen was the pen name adopted by the Danish baroness Karen Blixen. The baroness lived in British East Africa from 1914 to 1931, managing a coffee plantation that she and her husband had purchased. Her stories of African life, published in Out of Africa and Shadows on the Grass, with their wealth of exotic detail, appealed to many readers and more recently, with the appearance of a movie based on Out of Africa, to moviegoers. In the paragraph that follows, she describes the beauty and toil of running the coffee plantation.

Word to Know

Ethiopia someone from the African country of Ethiopia

Here are times of great beauty on a coffee-farm. When the plantation flowered in the beginning of the rains, it was a radiant sight, like a cloud of chalk, in the mist and the drizzling rain, over six hundred acres of land. The coffee-blossom has a delicate slightly bitter scent, like the blackthorn blossom. When the field reddened with the ripe berries, all the women and the children, whom they call the Totos, were called out to pick the coffee off the trees, together with the men; then the wagons and carts brought it down to the factory near the river. Our machinery was never quite what it should have been, but we had planned and built the factory ourselves and thought highly of it. Once the whole factory burned down and had to be built up again. The big coffee-dryer turned and turned, rumbling the coffee in its iron belly with a sound like pebbles that are washed about on the sea-shore. Sometimes the coffee would be dry, and ready to take out of the dryer, in the middle of the night. That was a picturesque moment, with many hurricane lamps in the huge dark room of the factory, that was hung everywhere with cobwebs and coffee-husks, and with eager glowing dark faces, in the light of the lamps, round the dryer; the factory, you felt, hung in the great African night like a bright jewel in an Ethiopian's ear. Later on the coffee was hulled, graded and sorted, by hand, and packed in sacks sewn up with a saddler's needle.

Questions About the Reading

1. Was the coffee factory efficient and smooth-running? Why did it

appeal to the writer?

2. What had to be done when the coffee in the dryer was dry?
3. Do you think the writer herself did much work on the plantation?

What sort of work do you think she did?

Questions About the Writer's Strategies

1. Identify at least two **similes** in the paragraph. Are they effective? Why or why not?
2. What **order** does the writer use to describe the plantation?
3. In what respects is this paragraph a **narrative** as well as a description?
4. Try to pick out some particularly effective **details** in the paragraph, and analyze why they are effective. How do they help you visualize what the writer is describing?

Writing Assignments

1. Write a paragraph describing a job in which your whole family pitched in to help. Try to include details that show how you felt about the job.
2. Think about an outdoor location that is important to you. Pick one season of the year and write a paragraph describing what this place looks like during that time. Try to use order of importance. That is, begin with the details that seem most important to how this place looks and feels. Then move on to lesser details.

Chapter 3 / Description

The Subway Station

Gilbert Highet

For many years a professor at Columbia University in New York, Gilbert Highet was born in Scotland and became a U.S. citizen in 1951. The following paragraph, taken from his book Talents and Geniuses, demonstrates the writer's appreciation of a place that many of us simply ignore.

Words to Know

abominable hateful

congealed thickened, made solid

defilement made dirty

dubious doubtful, suspect

encrusted covered with a thick crust

meager scanty, not enough

perfunctory carelessly indifferent

vaulting an arched structure

zest keen enjoyment

Standing in a subway station, I began to appreciate the place—almost to enjoy it. First of all, I looked at the lighting: a row of meager electric bulbs, unscreened, yellow, and coated with filth, stretched toward the black mouth of the tunnel, as though it were a bolt hole in an abandoned coal mine. Then I lingered, with zest, on the walls and ceiling: lavatory tiles which had been white about fifty years ago, and were now encrusted with soot, coated with the remains of a dirty liquid which might be either atmospheric humidity mingled with smog or the result of a perfunctory attempt to clean them with cold water; and, above them, gloomy^y vaulting from which dingy paint was peeling off like scabs from an old wound, sick black paint leaving a leprous white undersurface. Beneath my feet, the floor was a nauseating dark brown with black stains upon it which might be stale oil or dry chewing gum or some worse defilement; it looked like the hallway of a condemned slum building. Then my eye traveled to the tracks, where two lines of glittering steel—the only positively clean objects in the whole place—ran out of darkness into darkness above an unspeakable mass of congealed oil, puddles of dubious liquid, and a mishmash of old cigarette packets, mutilated and filthy newspapers, and the debris that filtered down from the street above through a barred grating in the

The Subway Station | Gilbert Highet 69

roof. As I looked up toward the sunlight, I could see more debris sifting slowly downward, and making an abominable pattern in the slanting beam of dirt-laden sunlight. I was going on to relish more features of this unique scene: such as the advertisement posters on the walls—here a text from the Bible, there a half-naked girl, here a woman wearing a hat consisting of a hen sitting on a nest full of eggs, and there a pair of girl's legs walking up the keys of a cash register—all scribbled over with unknown names and well-known obscenities in black crayon and red lipstick; but then my train came in at last, I boarded it, and began to read. The experience was over for the time.

Questions About the Reading

1. What words does Highet use to demonstrate his growing appreciation of the subway?
2. Highet seems to be appreciating the subway station for the first time. Is this his first wait in a subway station, or does he ride the subway often? How can you tell?

3. At several points in the description, the writer creates the impression of squalor and disease. What are some of the words and phrases that he uses to do so?

Questions About the Writer's Strategies

1. In the second sentence, the writer uses a **simile**—"as though it were a bolt hole in an abandoned coal mine"—to describe the tunnel. Find two other similes in the paragraph. Are they effective?
2. In what **order** does the writer present the description?
3. What is the **topic** sentence of this paragraph? Where is it located?
4. The paragraph is written in the past tense. Might it be more effective in the present? Rewrite the first three sentences in the present to see how they sound.
5. Why does the writer compare the floor of the subway station to the hallway of a condemned slum building?

Writing Assignments

1. Imagine that you are riding on the subway car the writer boarded at the end of the paragraph. Describe the people you might meet.
2. Write a paragraph describing a public place, such as a shopping mall, a parking lot, or a gas station. Use **spatial order** to organize your description.

68

Chapter 3 / Description

3. Describe an object, place, or event that frightened you but that you were still drawn to (for instance, a horror movie, a ride in an amusement park, or a deserted road). What frightened you? What kept you interested? Use specific details.