

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 Ethiop someone from the African country of Ethiopia

There 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?