The Lemon Orchard by Alex la Guma

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About the author

Wiki says: Alex la Guma was a South African novelist noted for his short stories such as ‘A Walk in the Night’, ‘The Stone Country’ and ‘Fog in the Seasons End’, many of which were banned in his own country. He wrote during the South African Apartheid and was the leader of the South African Coloured People’s Organizations. He was awarded the Lotus Prize for Literature in 1969.

In a nutshell:
The Lemon Orchard follows an assumed five characters, one educated foreign ‘coloured’ man and four, rough ‘locals’, one of which is armed. The foreign man has been taken captive and is being escorted through the Orchard late at night by the others, presumably for being “cheeky to a white man” or being rude to a member of the local church. The ‘coloured’ man is then led to clear space in the Orchard and it is implied but not stated that the coloured man is shot, explaining the “scattered quicksilver.”

IMPORTANT NOTE: when writing about the 'coloured' man, as he is called in the story, unless you are writing a quote, please refer to him either as: the victim, the lynched man, the black man or the 'coloured' man (USE QUOTE MARKS HERE). Please remember that the term coloured is not a usable word these days, having its origins in selected breeding for slavery and/or different levels of acceptable societal prejudice according to lightness of skin.

PRIORITY: HIGH/MEDIUM HIGH:
This can be a superb choice and many of you will write really powerfully on it. However, if you are less confident, there are safer pairings. However, it should definitely be studied and can be a very good passage response choice.

Rough thematic areas:
Isolation, power/misuse of power, social status, oppression, hopelessness, societal blindness

POSSIBLE ESSAY PAIRINGS WITH:
- Yellow Wallpaper (oppression by society, isolation, unbreakable cycle, conflict, darkness/light, power/misuse of power);
- Games at Twilight (isolation, darkness/light, death of hope, possibly colonial oppression, power/misuse of power);
- Five Twenty (oppression, isolation, colours and physical symbols, strength of the 'captive')
- Lim's Journey (isolation, oppression, unbreakable cycle, colours and objects, hopelessness);
- Five Twenty (age/youth, oppression, colours and objects as symbols - esp flowers, isolation, change)

Also, in a different way:
- An Englishman's Home (settings as symbols, outsiders, power/misuse of power, arrogance and ignorance, conflict)
- Meteor (outsiders, arrogance, destruction, conflict, appearances, social irony)

Deeper analysis:
The leader’s shotgun is a recurring symbol of power and dominance in the short story, which not only highlights the control that the “baas” has over his “prisoner’s” life, but also the hegemony and authority the white race has over the “coloured,” in this apartheid society. The idea that a white man holds the power to decide whether the “coloured man” lives or dies, is indicative of the European race’s dominion and preponderance in all aspects of South African society at the time, including the government, justice system, et al.
The lantern and the moon both provide contrasting symbols of hope in the story, by cutting through the dark surroundings of the lemon orchard with their light. The lantern, used by the white men, is an artificial light source and therefore representing a false hope. It represents the fallacy that the European’s have created: that they will be able to live in a better, more peaceful and harmonious society through the implementation of segregation and the black race’s degradation. However - just like the battery lantern being unable to illuminate the whole orchard - their attempts, by these divisive means, are futile. Only the natural and powerful light of the moon can achieve this; representing the end of apartheid and a beginning of a more whole and cohesive society. A full moon is a striking embodiment of this inclusive, serene South Africa. However, this ostensibly obvious method is “hidden behind long high, parallels of cloud” and is therefore not apparent to the men.

The moon also represents South African society in another way. At the beginning of the story the moon is said to be “hidden behind…cloud,” implying that it is avoiding or trying to ignore the overtly displayed injustices in front of it. This echoes the behaviour of white South African society at the time, with the moon symbolising the apathetic disregard for the treatment of the black demographic. However, at the end of the story, La Guma heavily stresses the beauty of the “small amphitheatre surrounded by fragrant growth,” which is only created when the moon’s “white light” broke the “blackness of the night which crouched over the orchard,” showering the leaves with “wet silver.” La Guma is insinuating here that only through the acknowledgement of, and action against, racial discrimination in South African society, will the country be able to achieve true tranquillity, beauty and radiance.

**Ways of Seeing**
**Marxist perspective**
The white men represent society’s upper class, who control and oppress the black man (or lower classes) through use of force and terror; represented by the shotgun. The story shows how the rich view the poor as “uncivilised,” justifying their abuse and neglect of the lower classes without “getting into trouble over it.” The restraints and bonds tying the black man’s wrists show how the wealthy restrict the workers to lives of suffering; hardship and poverty ensure that the proletariat are never powerful enough to challenge the aristocracy’s position of power and authority. The black man’s silent, passive resistance to the white men’s demands demonstrates how the lower classes discreetly rebel against the wealthy in their day to day lives. However, the fact that the black man remains the “prisoner,” is used to show the failings of passivity and encourage the lower classes to actively and aggressively oppose the upper classes’ tyranny and autocracy; the only way to achieve an end to the exploitation and subjugation of the masses.

**Post-colonialism:** Pretty obvious one. The oppressive lynch mob misuse the power which they feel is their right, ironically punishing a man who they see as ignorant and and outsider yet he is shown to be an educated indigenous man. His only crime is to try to rebel against the status quo and demand respect from his oppressors - in this way, he is shown to be more noble and witter than the men who have set out to punish him. They use sjamboks (see photo below) to keep him in line, whipping him lightly like these objects would be used to control an animal: the sjamboks are metaphors for the brutal misuse of power by the ruling white class in South Africa and how black people are seen and treated as animals, without the recognition of the same thought or feeling as whites. The dog barks out, representing how what they are doing is wrong, yet it is silenced and their crime goes unseen in the darkness, just as the oppression is always present but not recognised by the world at large. The dog begins to bark again as the moment of violence approaches: it is a lone voice calling out but is overlooked. The brief moment of light, in it's astonishing beauty and clarity, shows the beauty of the country, which is not appreciated by the men, who are only concerned with power and punishment.

**Important points that might cause confusion or be overlooked:**

**Nasty stuff:**
A Sjambok is a long, stiff whip made of rhino hide or rubber - the tail has a long reach (very symbolic). It is typically used on herd animals but has also been historically used against black people. It is a very, very symbolic aspect of the story, given that all of the white men carry one. The obvious implication is that they are going to use it on the man (they make it clear they do not want to murder him). The metaphorical aspect of what the Sjambok symbolises NEEDS to be explored - this is a crucial object.

**The "black Englishman"**
This refers to their captive not in terms of him being an Afro-Caribbean Englishman, but as a derogatory comment about
how he has tried to 'civilise' himself like a white man, which they find amusing. In addition to this, the Afrikaans men would see the British/English as invaders and oppressors in their land, making their captive seem even more alien: to them, the image of an educated, well spoken black man is ridiculously out of place. Interestingly though, there are elements of the recognition of their own repression here (so as the indigenous people have been repressed by the Afrikaans, so the Afrikaans have been oppressed by the British: what can la Guma be saying here about power?).

The man holding the lantern turns the light onto a man with the "face like red clay" and "ice blue eyes"

The pronoun placing here can be potentially confusing. The writer is describing the leader of the Afrikaans men, not the captive.

Student-led Enquiry

1. What is the significance of the division in the two rows of trees and the 'parallel clouds'? - think about South African society at the time.
2. How does the way in which the “coloured” man is described or labelled change throughout the narrative, what is the significance of this?
3. How does the setting of the play reflect the state of society during the time period?
4. What is the author trying to convey to his readers by purposefully making the characters in the narrative anonymous?
5. Find uses of derogatory lexis towards the 'coloured' man. Find the meanings behind some of these words.
6. Does the use of these words have any significance, or are they just common for the time?
7. What information can you gather about the ‘tormentors’ from their speech and description? Eg. education, relations etc
8. Is there any significance behind the title “The Lemon Orchard”. Why?
9. Discuss the effectiveness of the ending and what implications you draw from it.
10. Why was this story written, consider the time period, the race of the writer and his affiliations.
11. Discuss sections of the story in which the ‘coloured man’ is described as “uncivilised” and when the “baas” highlights the importance of respect. What is ironic about this statement from the leader?

Mrs Wilding's other Key areas to investigate:

a) Find semantic fields of obfuscation (ie language of things being hidden or obscured). For instance "the moon was hidden", cloud like "dirty cotton wool" but also lots of others. Why does la Guma do this? What atmosphere is created and what can this hidden world symbolise about the society he is writing in?
b) At the end of the story there is some beautiful imagery with "the moonlight clung for a while...quivering shine of scattered quicksilver" - however, there is a lot of language of transience in this fleeting moment of beauty before the brutality begins. Explore the language and techniques and then consider the symbolism of the placing of this brief moment juxtaposed before the inevitable violence.
c) The dog barks at the beginning as the men are introduced, then stops abruptly. The likely reason behind an abrupt cease to the barking is the intervention of the owner. What could this symbolise? It begins to bark again as the men come to the place that they are going to beat the man - what could this therefore signify?
d) There are vivid, sensual (not sexual) descriptions, especially towards the end of the story - why?
e) How is the black man ironically presented as more educated, more noble and arguably stronger than his captors?
f) Near the end, in the "blackness of the night" (so hidden again), there is the scent of lemons - if you compare the idea with the woman creeping in the darkness of The Yellow Wallpaper with the 'yellow' scent how can you draw parallels or contrasts between what is symbolised here between the two stories?
g) see the note on Post-Colonialism about Sjamboks: explore the metaphor and make sure you can write about it,