

Bessie Head

living with books



Sunday Times

Bessie Head (1937 – 1986)

Bessie Amelia Emery was born in Pietermaritzburg to a white mother who was a patient in the Fort Napier Mental Hospital and a black father. Bessie was transferred from her foster mother's care to St Monica's Home, an Anglican Boarding school for 'coloured girls' near Durban in 1950. When Bessie found out about her real mother she was shocked and turned to books for comfort.

In 1953, she passed her Junior Certificate (Grade 10) and subsequently a two year teacher training course. She then taught at a primary school in Durban. In 1958 she went to live in Cape Town's famous District Six and worked as the only woman reporter for *Golden City Post*. In 1959, she moved to Johannesburg where she wrote for *Drum*.

Head met leader of the Pan African Congress (PAC), Robert Sobukwe, just before the Sharpeville massacre and was arrested for PAC connections. After she turned state witness she tried to commit suicide and was hospitalised. She returned to Cape Town, met and married Harold Head. They lived in District Six and both of them wrote for *The New African*. Head finished writing *The Cardinals* and gave birth to her son Howard in 1962.

The next year Bessie left Harold and was also compelled to leave South Africa on an exit visa. She took up a teaching job in Serowe in the Bechuanaland Protectorate (later Botswana). In 1966, she worked for 5 months on the Bamangwato Development Farm at Radisele, and wrote *When Rain Clouds Gather* based on her experiences.

Maru was published in 1971 to favourable reviews. But Head suffered a mental breakdown in the same year and was hospitalised at Lobatse Mental Hospital.

After *A Question of Power* was published in 1973, she became a celebrity abroad but struggled to get Botswana citizenship. She expressed her feelings often that Botswana people looked down on her but never learned to speak Setswana. She drank heavily and died in 1986 in Botswana's Sekgoma Memorial Hospital.

Letters as Historical Sources

In this lesson plan, learners will get a small taste of the power of Bessie Head's writing. They will also be exposed to the great personal suffering she endured, partly as a result of the hurtful ideas about coloured people that were encouraged during apartheid. Head's letters tell us a great deal about the loneliness caused by prejudice.



Bessie Head interviewing a fortune teller, *Drum* photographer Bailey's African History Archive, 1960

'Bessie was a bookworm, that's what she was.'

Eilersen, GS. *Bessie Head: Thunder behind Her Ears*. 1995

Samples of Bessie Head's writing

'If you tell my people that there are countries with hills and hills of green grass where no cattle graze, they will not believe you. Our cattle graze on parched grass that is paper-dry. Our goats eat the torn shreds of wind-scattered papers and thrust their mouths into the thorn bushes to nibble at the packed clusters of leaves that look like pin-points of stars farflung in the heavens.' (Source: Head, B. 'The Green Tree' in *Transition*, Volume 4, Number 16, Sept/Oct, 1964, p.33.)

'Then, into this narrow constricted world came the woman from America. Some people keep hoping she will go away one day, but already her big strong stride has worn the pathways of the village flat. She is everywhere about because she is a woman, resolved and unshakeable in herself...this woman from the West is the most oddly beautiful person I have seen. Every cross-current of the earth seems to have stopped in her and blended into an amazing harmony. She has a big dash of Africa, a dash of Germany, some Cherokee and heaven knows what else...'

Head, B. 'The Woman from America' in *New Statesman*, 26 August 1966

Other works: *Village of the Rain Wind*; *The Collector of Treasures*; *A Bewitched Crossroad*, short stories and articles.

Source A: 'I am an individual'

I detest snobbery but maybe I'm a mental snob...I search avidly for anyone really intelligent. With intelligent people one forgets such shameful matters as the colour of one's skin and facial features which seem to matter so much in South Africa. Heavens! I will not ape anybody. I am an individual. No one shall make me ashamed of what I am!

extract from letter to Lady Warden of St Monica's Home, Margaret Cadmore, written in 1958 in Ellersen, GS. Bessie Head: Thunder Behind Her Ears, 1995, p. 41

Source B: Sexual harassment

P.O. Box 130, Serowe
27 October 1965

Dear Randolph,

... There is a man here, the principal of our school - he sort of thought he could get started to sleep with me - just like a frenzied itch but as a woman I mean nothing - when he couldn't get rid of the itch he just turned on me - right to the point of mishandling me in front of the kids and twisting my arm. I had to bite his hand to let me go. This happened on Monday 25/10/65. I fled away from the school screaming. He went and called the police that I had gone out of my mind. They came to my home and took me to the charge office.

This isn't the first occasion. I enclose a letter as proof that this is true. It's from the secretary who is in charge of schools. They had an emergency meeting and forced me to return. I told them my sanity can't stand it...

Yours sincerely, Bessie Head

to Randolph Vigne, 27 October 1966 in Randolph Vigne (ed). A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965 - 1979, pp. 9 - 11.

Source C: The 'Loony Bin'

P.O. Box 15, Serowe
15 July 1971

Dear Randolph,

...I was not well. I was tortured beyond endurance. For one brief moment I threw myself on the ground and said: "God, help me."... I wanted to overthrow everything overboard in one violent breath, which I did. No one followed what I was saying. It was all an internal torment belonging to me alone. In the confusion I opened up a wide radius of pain for other people.

The loony bin freed me for a brief while from a deep overhanging sense of evil, as though I had abruptly shaken off the devil, but I am lost in a sorrow too deep for words...

As ever,
Bessie

Letter to Randolph Vigne, 15 July 1971 in Randolph Vigne (ed). A Gesture of Belonging: Letters from Bessie Head, 1965 - 1979, pp. 143-4

Learner Activities

- How old was Bessie Head in 1958 when she wrote the letter cited in *Source A*?
- Why were coloured people in apartheid South Africa often made 'ashamed' of their skin colour?
- Why did the principal's sexual advance described in *Source B* make Bessie feel so bad?
- By the time Bessie wrote the letter cited in *Source C*, she had separated from her husband, was a single mother, and lived alone in a strange country. What else do you think could have accounted for the terrible torment she describes?
- Tick the following descriptive words/phrases you believe to be applicable to Bessie Head and then discuss the results with your peers: selfish; proud of who she was; snobbish; assertive; sensitive; creative; bitter; tortured; oppressed.

Other Ideas

Read some of Bessie Head's works!



Bessie Head National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown

Criteria for Assessment

- Learners will demonstrate insight into the plight of being classified coloured under apartheid.
- Learners will demonstrate understanding that sexual harassment can make women feel worthless.
- Learners will be able to extract information from Bessie Head's letters to draw conclusions about why she suffered so much.

Curriculum Link – Grades 10 & 11

See introduction to National Curriculum Statement (FET) that spells out links with the Constitution, which aims to 'heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights.'

LO 1, AS 3
LO 2, AS 2
LO 3, AS 2 & 3

Content Link – Grade 11 how did apartheid entrench ideas of race?