

A Power Struggle by Bessie Head

- **Printable text and learning activities (4 pages) created by Michelle Ford** (talkingpeople.net) with much love and respect for BH's work.
- Check out the website of the **Bessie Head Heritage Trust** in Botswana, who have been taking good care of BH's world.

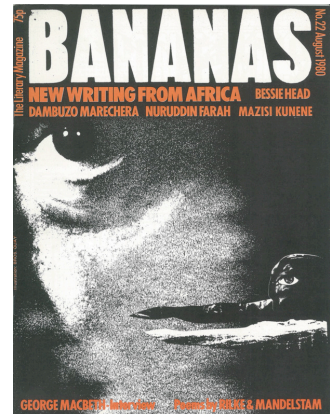
LEARNING ACTIVITIES

1. **Listening.** Without reading the transcript, listen to the story several times throughout a week at the Talking People Podcast (non-profit educational project at talkingpeople.net, a Mujer Palabra non-profit EFL project) <https://www.talkingpeople.net/tpodcast/stories-a-power-struggle-by-bessie-head/> (20 min)
2. **Speaking/Reading.** Read the story out loud paying attention to intonation, stress and pronunciation. If not in class, you can now listen while you read, and stop the recording to repeat.
3. **Learning to Write.** Read again to identify the content structure, paying attention what is said in each block. Jot down key words to draft your resulting outline.
4. **Learning to Write.** Read again to identify topic sentences and transitions and see how those relate to building the content structure. Check your outline.
5. **Writing/Language Work.** Read again to select descriptive sentences or passages for your list of Useful Language – Descriptions. Create your own using as many of the structures and language items you can.
6. **Language Work.** Read again to notice interesting language items for your list of Useful Language – Language Items (you wish to learn/consolidate)
7. **Working on Mistakes.** Using your LoM, list of mistakes, find examples of correct use in the text that will help you overcome your own. Remember to repeat those out loud visualizing the correct bit you have trouble with.
8. **About hyphenation.** Check out <https://www.hyphenation24.com/>

You can download more learning docs at the BH webpage, talkingpeople.net > Mediateque > Authors > Bessie Head, direct link: <https://www.talkingpeople.net/tp/literature/bessiehead/index.html>



BESSIE HEAD WAS BORN IN 1937, SOUTH AFRICA AND DIED IN 1986, BOTSWANA



ONE OF THE ISSUE WHERE BH PUBLISHED HER STORIES. AUGUST 1980

A Power Struggle (About 2,250 words)

§01 The universe had a more beautiful dream. It was not the law of the jungle or the survival of the fittest but a dream that had often been the priority of saints — the power to make evil irrelevant. All the people of Southern Africa had lived out this dream before the dawn of the colonial era. Time and again it shed its beam of light on their affairs although the same patterns of horror would arise like dark engulfing waves.

§02 It was as though once people had lived in settled communities for any length of time, hostilities of an intolerable nature developed due to power struggles, rivalries and jealousies. Not all the stories were attractive or coherent; they were often so direct and brutal that it was almost like darkness destroying darkness and no rule was untainted by it. It was before these fierce passions for power that people often gave way and it formed the base of the tangled story of tribal movement and migration. When it was all over, only a tree, a river bank, a hill or a mountain lingered in the memory as the dwelling place of a tribe.

§03 There were two brothers of the Tlabina clan, Davhana and Baeli. In more ways than one Davhana was destined to rule. He was the born heir to the throne and in acknowledgement of this, the old chief, their father, had, once his health began to fail him, handed to Davhana the sacred rain-making apparatus — a symbol of this destiny. But Davhana was also a fearfully rich personality with glowing black eyes. There was about him the restless beauty of the earth in motion and he could laugh for so long and so loudly that his laughter was like the sound of the wind rushing across the open plains. He was tall and strongly-built with lithe, agile movements. People humorously accorded to him the formal and often meaningless titles a king held as his due, such as Beautiful One or Great Lion but unlike other kings, Davhana earned them with his living personality. In spite of this / his succession was not assured and his destiny took an unpredictable turn.

§04 They were at the burial ceremony for their father when his brother, Baeli, abruptly threw down the first challenge to his succession. It was Davhana's right as his father's successor to turn the first sod in his grave. It was also a confirmation before the assembled people that he would rule. Davhana had his digging implement raised but his younger brother, Baeli, stepped in ahead of him and turned the first sod. The older brother stepped back instantly, his digging implement relaxed at his side. He flung his head back with an impatient gesture and stared at the horizon, his mouth curled down in contempt. The younger brother straightened up quietly. He too looked into the distance, a smile on his lips and menace in his eyes. The gestures were so unexpected that the assembled people stirred instinctively and stifled gasps of surprise swept through the crowd. There was not anyone present who did not know that the succession was open to dispute.

§05 Immediately, the dispute did not concern the people. The real power struggle would take place in the inner circle of relatives and councillors. It was often an impersonal process as far as the mass of the people were concerned — what they respected was not so much a chief in person as the position he occupied. And yet, there seemed a contradiction in this. It was real men of passion who fought for that position and should an evil man gain the throne, people would suffer. People had a number of cynical attitudes to cover such events. One of their attitudes was: "We pay homage to all the chief's sons, since which one of them will finally become chief is uncertain . . ." If things became too disruptive a large number of men would suddenly remember that they had not branded their cattle or attended to their everyday affairs.

§06 The two young men of passion turned away from the funeral ceremony and walked side by side for some distance; Davhana purposefully keeping pace with his brother.

"Baeli", he asked in his direct way. "Why did you turn the first sod on father's grave? It was my duty by right! You have shamed me in front of all the people! Why did you do it?"

§07 He listened with his whole body for this brother's reply but no reply was forthcoming — only the pacing of their feet walking in unison filled the silence. Davhana looked sideways at his brother's face. Baeli stared straight ahead; the smile still lingered around his mouth and there was an aloofness in his eyes. Had they in such an abrupt manner suddenly recognised that they were total strangers to each other? A day ago they had shared a youth together, hunted together and appeared to laugh at the same jokes. Only Davhana felt the pain. His personality radiated outwards, always reaching towards love and friendship. His brother's personality turned inwards into a whirlpool of darkness. He felt himself being dragged down into that whirlpool and instinctively he turned and walked off in his own direction.

§08 Davhana walked until he reached a clearing outside the village. Evening was approaching. The night was warm. A full yellow moon arose behind a small hill in the distance. The atmosphere was deeply silent and still. The subdued murmurs of insects in the grass were peaceful and sweet. The young man settled himself on the earth and was soon lost in his own thoughts. Now and then he sighed deeply as though he were reaching a crossroad with himself, as though he were drawing to himself the scattered fragments of his youthful life. He had lived with the reckless generosity of his personality and nothing in his past seemed a high peak. He had lived, danced, eaten and sung in the full enjoyment of the pleasures of the moment. The events of the day cast their dark shadows over him.

§09 Softly approaching footsteps stirred him out of his reverie. The moonlight outlined the form of one of the elders of the tribe. Davhana turned his head with his glowing look, inviting the old man to seat himself. The old man squatted low beside his reclining form and stared for some time in a detached way at the small hill behind which the moon had arisen.

§10 "Do your thoughts trouble you, Beautiful One?" the old man asked at last. "I have stood here for some time and heard you sigh and sigh."

"Oh no, Uncle", the young man said, with a vigorous shake of his head. "Nothing troubles me. If I sigh it may be only for a carefree youth which I am about to lose."

The elder plucked at a few strands of grass and continued to stare at the distant hill.

"Everyone took note today of the awful deed your brother committed", he said. "It was the most awful breach of good manners and some of us are questioning its motive."

The young man curled his mouth in contempt again as though it were beneath him to recognize avarice and ambition.

"Baeli has always had strange tendencies", he said. "Though I have liked him as my brother".

§11 The old man kept silent a while. When he spoke his voice was as sweet and peaceful as the subdued murmurs of the insects in the grass.

"I have come to teach you a few things about life", he said. "People have never been given a gift like you before, Beautiful One, and they look eagerly forward to your rule because they think that a time of prosperity and happiness lies before them. All these years you have lived with the people and your ways were good to them. When a man built his years you stopped to tie a knot in the rafters and the hunting spoils you shared generously with all your men, never demanding an abundant share for yourself. You spread happiness and laughter wherever you travelled. People understand these qualities. They are the natural gifts of a good man. But these very gifts can be a calamity in a ruler. A ruler has to examine the dark side of human life and understand that men belong to that darkness. There are many men born with inadequate gifts and this disturbs them. They have no peace within themselves and once their jealousy is aroused they do terrible things . . ."

§12 The old man hesitated, uncertain of how to communicate his alarms and fears. A ruler could only reach the day of installation without bloodshed provided no other member of his family had declared his ambition publicly. Bali had publicly declared his ambition and it needed only a little of that poison for all sorts of perverse things to happen. They had some horrible things in their history. They had been ruled by all sorts of lunatics and mental defectives who had mutually poisoned or assassinated each other. His grandfather had been poisoned by a brother who had in turn been assassinated by another brother. Not even Davhana's father's rule was untainted by it — there were several assassinations behind his father's peaceful and lengthy reign.

§13 “You will soon find out the rules of life, Beautiful One”, the old man murmured. “You will have to kill or be killed.”

 The young man said nothing in reply. The old man sat bathed in moonlight and the subdued murmurs of insects in the grass were peaceful and sweet.

§14 The struggle that unfolded between Davhana and his brother was so subtle that it was difficult to deal with. It took place when men sat deep in council debating the issues of the day. There was always a point at which Abeli could command all the attention himself and in doing so make his brother, Davhana, irrelevant. Bali would catch a debate just at the point at which his brother had spoken and while a question or statement trembled in the air awaiting a reply, Baeli would step in and deflect men’s thoughts in a completely new direction, thus making the previous point completely invalid. Some men began to enjoy this game and daily, Davhana rapidly lost ground with them. He refused at crucial points to assert his power and allowed dialogues to drift away from him. He indulged in no counter-intrigue when it became evident from the laughter of the men that his brother had begun to intrigue with them.

§15 When they moved into the dark side of the moon, the most fearful massacre took place. Davhana alone escaped with his life and fled into the dark night. He had a wound in his right shoulder where a spear had pierced him as he lay asleep in his hut. He did not know who had stabbed him but in the confusion of the struggle in the dark he broke free of the hands that lunged at him and escaped.

§16 Once, during his flight in the dark, Davhana paused again and took stock of his destiny. It was still scattered and fragmentary but the freshness and beauty of his youth lay on him like a protective mantle. If power was the unfocused demoniacal stare of his brother then he would have none of that world. Nothing had paralyzed, frustrated and enraged him more than that stare.

 “He can take all that he desires”, Davhana thought. “I shall not go back there. I want to live.”

 He chose for himself that night the life of one who would take refuge where he could find it and so he continued his flight into the night.

§17 The people of the Tlabina clan awoke the following morning to a new order. They had a murderer as their ruler. Bali had slain whatever opposition he was likely to encounter and no one was immediately inclined to oppose him. The ritual of installation proceeded along its formal course. When Baeli appeared a chorus of adulation greeted him and everyone present made humble obeisance. The usual speeches were made to the impersonal office of kingship.

§18 After three moons had waxed and waned word travelled back to the people that their ruler, Davhana, was alive and well and had sought refuge with a powerful PEDI clan. The people of the Tlabina clan began to vanish from their true home, sometimes in large groupings, sometimes in small trickles until they had abandoned Baeli. If the wild dogs ate him, who knows?

§19 A power struggle was the great dialogue of those times and many aspects of the dialogue were touched by the grandeur of kings like Davhana. It was hardly impersonal as living men always set the dialogue in motion. They forced people under duress to make elaborate choices between good and evil. This thread of strange philosophical beauty was deeply woven into the history of the land and the story was repeated many times over so that it became the only history people ever knew.

§20 With the dawn of the colonial era this history was subdued. A new order was imposed on life. People’s kings rapidly faded from memory and became myths of the past. No choices were left between what was good and what was evil. There was only slavery and exploitation.