

Practice Comprehension # 3- The Road from Coorain: An Australian Memoir

1 After the great rain of 1939, the rainfall declined noticeably in each successive year. In 1940, the slight fall was of no consequence because our major worry was that the accumulation of growth on the land would produce serious bushfires. These did occur on land quite close to us, but my father's foresight in getting cattle to eat down the high grass preserved Coorain from that danger.

2 In 1941, the only rain of the year was a damp cold rain with high wind which came during the lambing season in May and June and carried off many ewes and their newborn lambs. After that there were no significant rainfalls for five years.

The unfolding of a drought of these dimensions has a slow and inexorable quality. The weather perpetually holds out hope. Storm clouds gather. Thunder rolls by. But nothing happens. Each year as the season for rain approaches, people begin to look hopefully up at the sky. It mocks them with a few showers, barely enough to lay the dust. That is all.

3 It takes a long time for a carefully managed grazing property to decline, but three years without rain will do it.

Once the disaster begins, it unfolds swiftly. So it was with us.

4 My father and I would set out to work on horseback as usual, but instead of our customary cheerful and wide-ranging conversations he would be silent. As we looked at sheep, or tried to assess the pasture left in a particular paddock, he would swear softly, looking over the fence to a neighbour's property, already eaten out and beginning to blow sand.

5 Each time he said, 'If it doesn't rain, it will bury this feed in a few weeks.' It was true and I could think of nothing consoling to say.

6 His usual high spirits declined with the state of the land, until the terrible day when many of our own sheep were lost because of a sudden cold rain and wind when they had too little food in their stomachs. By 1942 it was apparent that the drought could be serious.

7 Shortly afterwards, the first terrible dust storm arrived boiling out of the central Australian desert. One sweltering late afternoon in March, I walked out to collect wood for the stove. Glancing towards the west, I saw a terrifying sight. A vast boiling cloud was mounting in the sky, black and sulphurous yellow at the heart, varying shades of ochre red at the edges. Where I stood, the air was utterly still, but the writhing cloud was approaching silently and with great speed. Suddenly I noticed that there were no birds to be seen or heard. All had taken shelter. I

called my mother. We watched helplessly. Always one for action, she turned swiftly, went indoors and began to close windows. Outside I collected the buckets, rakes, shovels and other implements that could blow away or smash a window if hurled against one by the boiling wind. Within the hour, my father arrived home. He and my mother sat on the back step not in their usual restful contemplation, but silenced instead by dread.

8 A dust storm usually lasts days, blotting out the sun, launching banshee winds day and night. It is dangerous to stray far from shelter, because the sand and grit lodge in one's eyes, and a visibility often reduced to a few feet can make one completely disorientated. Animals which become exhausted and lie down are often sanded over and smothered. There is nothing anyone can do but stay inside, waiting for the calm after the storm. Inside, it is stifling. Every window must be closed against the dust, which seeps relentlessly through the slightest crack. Meals are gritty and sleep elusive. Rising in the morning, one sees a perfect outline of one's body, an after image of white where the dust has not collected on the sheets.

9 As the winds seared our land, they took away the dry herbage, piled it against the fences, and then slowly began to silt over the debris. It was three days before we could venture out, days of almost unendurable tension. The crashing of the boughs of trees against our roof and the sharp roar as a nearly empty rainwater tank blew off its stand and rolled away, triggered my father's recurring nightmares of France during World War I, so that when he did fall into a fitful slumber it would be to awake screaming. It was usually I who woke him from his nightmares. I, the child in the family, would waken and attempt to soothe a frantic adult.

10 When we emerged, there were several feet of sand piled up against the windbreak to my mother's garden; the contours of new sandhills were beginning to form in places where the dust eddied and collected. There was no question that there were also many more bare patches where the remains of dry grass and herbage had lifted and blown away.

11 It was always a miracle to me that animals could endure so much. As we checked the property, there were dead sheep in every paddock to be sure, but fewer than I'd feared. My spirits began to rise and I kept telling my father the damage was not too bad. 'That was only the first storm,' he said bleakly. He had seen it all before and knew what was to come.

Question 1:

- a) What do we learn about the rainfalls in this part of Australia in the years 1939, 1940 and 1941? [1]

- b) Identify two ways in which the weather was making fun of the residents. [2]

- c) Suggest what was the agricultural standing of this area before the downfall in rains. [1]

- d) Explain, using your own words, what the writer's father was worried would happen if there continued to be no rain. (paragraphs 4–5). [2]

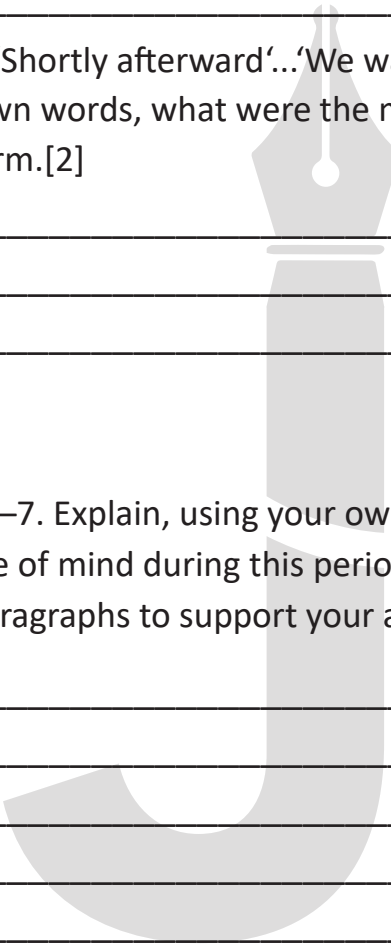
e) What two things led to the deaths of sheep on 'the terrible day' (paragraph 6)? [2]

f) What word used in paragraph 6 describes the lack of rain? [1]

g) Reread paragraph 7 ('Shortly afterward'...'We watched helplessly.') and explain, using your own words, what were the main signs of the approaching dust storm.[2]

h) (Reread paragraphs 4–7. Explain, using your own words, the father's thoughts and his state of mind during this period. Give three details from anywhere in these paragraphs to support your answer. [3]

i) Reread paragraphs 7–9 ('Always one for action...' to 'to awake screaming.') and give five dangers or problems caused by a dust storm. [2]



Marks Obtained: [/16]

Question 2:

a) Reread the end of paragraph 9 ('I, the child in the family, would waken and attempt to soothe a frantic adult..'). What does the writer want to suggest to the reader at this point in the story? [2]

b) What two impressions does the writer want to convey to the reader here: ('It was three days before we could venture out, days of almost unendurable tension. The crashing of the boughs of trees against our roof and the sharp roar as a nearly empty rainwater tank blew off its stand and rolled away, triggered my father's recurring nightmares of France during World War I.') [2]

c) Explain why the writer uses the word "slumber" rather than "rest" in the sentence: "so that when he did fall into a fitful slumber it would be to awake screaming.' [1]

d) In paragraph 11, what is the significance of the word 'bleakly' to describe how his father spoke? [1]
