from Long Walk to Freedom: 
The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela

The village of Qunu was situated in a narrow, grassy valley crisscrossed by clear streams and overlooked by green hills. It consisted of no more than a few hundred people who lived in huts, which were beehive-shaped structures of mud walls, with a wooden pole in the center holding up a peaked, grass roof. The floor was made of crushed ant-heaps, the hard dome of excavated earth above an ant colony, and was kept smooth by smearing it regularly with fresh cow dung. The smoke from the hearth escaped through the roof, and the only opening was a low doorway one had to stoop to walk through. The huts were generally grouped together in a residential area that was some distance away from the maize fields. There were no roads, only paths through the grass worn away by barefooted boys and women. The women and children of the village wore blankets dyed in ocher, only the few Christians in the village wore Western-style clothing. Cattle, sheep, goats, and horses grazed together in common pastures. The land around Qunu was mostly treeless except for a cluster of poplars on a hill overlooking the village. . . .

Maize (what we call mealies and people in the west call corn), sorghum, beans, and pumpkins formed the largest portion of our diet. . . . The water used for farming, cooking, and washing had to be fetched in buckets from streams and springs. This was women's work, and indeed, Qunu was a village of women and children: most of the men spent the greater part of the year working on remote farms or in the mines along the Reef, the great ridge of gold-bearing rock and shale that forms the southern boundary of Johannesburg. They returned perhaps twice a year, mainly to plow their fields. . . .

Of my mother's three huts, one was used for cooking, one for sleeping, and one for storage. In the hut in which we slept, there was no furniture in the Western sense. We slept on mats and sat on the ground. I did not discover pillows until I went to Mqhekezweni. My mother cooked food in a three-legged iron pot over an open fire in the center of the hut or outside. Everything we ate we grew and made ourselves. My mother planted and harvested her own mealies. Mealies were harvested from the field when they were hard and dry. They were stored in sacks or pits dug in the ground. . . .

From an early age, I spent most of my free time in the veld playing and fighting with the
other boys of the village. A boy who remained at home tied to his mother’s apron strings was regarded as a sissy. At night, I shared my food and blanket with these same boys. I was no more than five when I became a herd-boy, looking after sheep and calves in the fields. I discovered the almost mystical attachment that the Xhosa have for cattle, not only as a source of food and wealth, but as a blessing from God and a source of happiness. It was in the fields that I learned how to knock birds out of the sky with a sling-shot, to gather wild honey and fruits and edible roots, to drink warm, sweet milk straight from the udder of a cow, to swim in the clear, cold streams, and to catch fish with twine and sharpened bits of wire. . . . From these days I date my love of the veld, of open spaces, the simple beauties of nature, the clean line of the horizon.

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1. What do you think the climate of Qunu is like? What information in the reading makes you think so?

2. How does geography affect the family life of the villagers?

3. Which features of the landscape does Mandela remember best?

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**Critical Thinking**

4. **Synthesizing** How do you think Mandela’s childhood experiences affected his involvement in the fight for freedom for black South Africans?