

RESOURCES: X-KIT Achieve, Imagined Worlds, Macrat & Past Examination Papers

SECTION A: ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

6. MOTHO KE MOTHO KA BATHO BABANG

Jeremy Cronin

(A Person is a Person Because of Other People)

- 1 By holding my mirror out of the window I see
 2 Clear to the end of the passage.
 3 There's a person down there.
 4 A prisoner polishing a doorhandle.
 5 In the mirror I see him see
 6 My face in the mirror,
 7 I see the fingertips of his free hand
 8 Bunch together, as if to make
 9 An object the size of a badge
 10 Which travels up to his forehead
 11 The place of an imaginary cap.
 12 (This means: A warder)
 13 Two fingers are extended in a vee
 14 And wiggle like two antennae.
 15 (He's being watched.)
 16 A finger of his free hand makes a watch-hand's arc
 17 On the wrist of his polishing arm without
 18 Disrupting the slow-slow rhythm of his work.
 19 (Later. Maybe later we can speak.)
 20 *Hey! Wat maak jy daar?*
 21 – a voice from around the corner.
 22 *No. Just polishing baas.*
 23 He turns back to me, now watch
 24 His free hand, the talkative one,
 25 Slips quietly behind
 26 – *Strength brother, it says,*
 27 In my mirror,
 28 A black fist

DICTION

WORD	MEANING
TITLE	A Person is a Person Because of Other People
Line 8 – bunch together	fingers move close together to form a tight grip
Line 9 – badge	cloth bearing a design or words, worn to identify a person or to indicate membership of an organization e.g. police force.

Line 10 – forehead	the part of the face above the eyebrows.
Line 13 – extended	made longer or
Line 13 – vee	shaped into the letter V
Line 14 – wiggle	to move up and down or from side to side with small rapid movements
Line 14 – antennae	1. a pair of long, thin sensory appendages / feelers on the heads of insects 2. an aerial (V-SHAPED)
Line 16 – arc	a part of a curve, especially a part of the circumference of a circle
Line 20 – <i>Wat maak jy daar?</i>	Afrikaans question: <i>What are you doing there?</i>
Line 22 – <i>baas</i>	Afrikaans word: <i>boss</i>

THE POET

Jeremy Cronin is one of South Africa's best-known poets, whose work ranges from powerful political witness to beautiful love poetry. Cronin was born in Durban and grew up in Cape Town. He studied literature and philosophy at the University of Cape Town (UCT), where he became a Marxist and was recruited into the South African Communist Party, then a banned organisation. He studied in France and returned to South Africa to lecture in the philosophy department at UCT. He continued his work in the struggle against apartheid and in 1976 was arrested and sentenced to seven years in prison. While he was in prison, his wife died and he was not allowed to attend her funeral. He wrote a lot of poetry during his years in prison, including '*Motho Ke Motho Ka Batho Babang*'. He had to smuggle his poetry out of the prison or memorise it and record it when he was freed. He left prison in 1983 and continued his work as a political activist. Cronin was forced to flee the country in 1987 with his second wife and baby boy and they lived in exile in London and Lusaka. He returned to South Africa in 1990 and became an ANC member of parliament, and later a deputy minister in the Cabinet.

TITLE

- ▶ The title refers to a well-known African philosophy: *Ubuntu* – the connectedness that exists or should exist between people and the need for human kindness.
- ▶ The title suggests that one needs other people to have an identity, to be recognised or seen by others, and that there is great support in being part of a group.
- ▶ In prison, a person needs companionship. Here, he knows he is not completely isolated, that he can rely on others to give him strength to cope with his situation and to keep him human.
- ▶ The prisoners who are isolated from each other in their cells, find ways to communicate with and support each other in order to maintain their humanity in an inhumane situation.
- ▶ The title records the value and importance of others to provide group strength.

TYPE AND FORM

- ▶ The poet uses free verse without any rhyme scheme or rhythm.
- ▶ There are many examples of enjambment, where the line runs on to the next line without any pause. This creates a smooth flow, as if the speaker is talking to the reader.
- ▶ The visual layout of the poem is important.
 - The meaning of the messages that the other prisoner is communicating are placed on the right side of the page, to set them apart from the speaker's description of what he sees.
 - The warder's words to the other prisoner are in the middle of the page, emphasising that the warder is not part of the same conversation that the two prisoners are having.

- The warder's direct speech and the prisoner's silent messages are both shown in italics.

THEME

- ▶ The theme of *Ubuntu*: As the title suggests, the theme of the poem is that we can only live a truly human life if we are connected to and interacting with other humans.
- ▶ It is just as important to have contact with like-minded humans – the prisoners got strength and support from their fellow prisoners, not from the warders.
- ▶ Any human endeavour, whether it is a political struggle or an everyday activity, is made easier and more meaningful by the support and encouragement of others.
- ▶ The theme of *appearance and reality*: There appear to be two entirely separate prisoners but in reality, they are joined in conversation. The prisoner doing the communicating appears to be just slowly doing a job he has been ordered to do but actually, he is using the opportunity presented by the mirror to make contact with another prisoner in a cell.

IMAGERY

The images in the poem are the gestures made by the other prisoner, which are meaningless to the reader until the speaker translates them. As the speaker describes the small movements of the prisoner's hand, we visualise them in our mind's eye:

- ▶ **The first message:** '*A warder*' is conveyed by a gesture imitating the round badge on a warder's cap. We imagine the four fingers bunching together and travelling up to his 'imaginary cap'.
- ▶ **The second message:** '*He's being watched*' is communicated by two fingers wiggling 'like two antennae' of an insect on the lookout for danger. This simile refers to the common gesture that indicates '*I'm watching you*' by pointing two fingers at one's eyes and then at the other person.
- ▶ **The third message:** '*Later*' involves a finger making an 'arc' like the curved path of the tip of a watch-hand as it shows the passing of time.
- ▶ **The final message:** '*Strength brother*' is conveyed by a simple clenched fist, the easily recognisable symbol for people's power and unity. The speaker mentions that it is a '*black*' fist but because the message is clearly between comrades (the speaker uses the word '*brother*') the image also represents a bond of humanity that cuts across racial barriers.

LINE ANALYSES

LINES 1-2: *By holding my mirror out of the window I see / Clear to the end of the passage.*

➤ Why would the poet use a mirror this way?

The poet is in a prison cell and thus is cut off from other people. The mirror allows him to see something of the world outside of his cell. The mirror enables him to see further than he is otherwise able to.

LINES 3-4: *There's a person down there. / A prisoner polishing a doorhandle.*

❖ Explain the change from 'person' in line 3 to 'prisoner' in line 4.

'Person' is a neutral word whereas 'prisoner' is very specific. The poet recognises the man as a person before labelling him as a 'prisoner'. If one did not already know that Cronin was in prison, one would need to be told that this is a prisoner not a warder or outside worker.

LINES 5-6: *In the mirror I see him see / My face in the mirror,*

➤ **How has the mirror begun to fulfil its purpose?**

The mirror is creating a connection between the two prisoners because it enables them to see each other. They know they are not alone. They can support each other – not physically but emotionally.

Lines 7-19: Refer to the poem on page 1

• **Describe a conversation of sorts.**

Why are lines 12, 15 and 19 enclosed in brackets and placed some way away from the margin?

The brackets enclose how the poet interprets the prisoner's sign language. This language is obviously something that has been worked out to help them communicate without being noticed. They are hidden secret signs and the brackets help to convey this. The placing of the lines draws attention to the words as well as showing the distance between the two prisoners.

• **Comment on the way the 'conversation' recorded in these lines (12, 15 and 19) progresses.**

As with the spoken language, which is indicated by italics (lines 20 & 22), in line 12, the poet tells the reader '*This means*' and then writes the sign language in italics.

In line 15, the reader is given the translation directly.

In line 19, the first word which is signed by the prisoner in the passage is italicised and then the poet expands on what it means to him so that the reader understands more.

The reader is thus drawn into the '*conversation*' and to these two inmates, as they are drawn closer to each other by this exchange.

LINE 18: *Disrupting the slow-slow rhythm of his work.*

• **Why is the repeated and hyphenated 'slow-slow' (line 18) better than just 'slow'?**

The repetition slows down the reading so that one gets a better sense of the prisoner's movements. He is taking his time with his work in order to carry on this '*conversation*'.

LINES 20-23: *Hey! Wat maak jy daar?*

– a voice from around the corner.

No. Just polishing baas.

He turns back to me, now watch

➤ **How is the section of the poem in lines 20-23 different from the rest of the poem?**
Note that there are several ways.

These lines record actual words: an exchange between the prisoner and a warder who is watching him. The speakers are in a very different relationship from that of the silent speakers. The use of Afrikaans, the different placement of the spoken words and the use of *italics* highlight this difference. There are no brackets, so it seems like an open conversation but actually the prisoner is concealing the truth.

► We do not know the prisoner's name, and it seems that the speaker also doesn't know him personally. The speaker describes him as 'a person' (line 3) and 'a prisoner' (line 4). Their comradeship and intimacy are based on their shared beliefs and values, and their shared opposition to apartheid.

► In line 23, the speaker says 'now watch' as if he is urging the reader to watch with him as the prisoner communicates his messages of solidarity and defiance. This also heightens the tone of intimacy and secrecy.

► In line 20, the **warder** says, 'Hey! Wat maak jy daar?' His tone is **commanding** / *authoritative* / *dictatorial* / *autocratic* while the

► In line 22, the **prisoner's tone** is **subservient** / *placatory* / *obedient* / *submissive* indicated by his words, 'No' and 'baas'.

IMPORTANT POINTS

SECTION B: ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS SET ON THE POEM:

- 3.1 Refer to lines 3 – 4: 'There's a person ... a door handle.'
Account for the speaker's use of the words 'a person' followed by the words 'a prisoner.' (2)
- 3.2 Refer to line 24: 'His free hand, the talkative one'.
Explain the significance of the image in this line. (2)
- 3.3 Refer to the title: 'Motho ke Motho ka Batho Babang (A Person is a Person Because of Other People).
Comment on the appropriateness of the title in the context of the poem. (3)
- 3.4 Refer to lines 19 – 28: '(Later. Maybe later ... / A black fist.'
Critically comment on the contrast between true and false communication in the context of the poem. (3)
- [10]

SECTION C: MORE QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ON THE POEM

1. Explain in your own words why the speaker holds his mirror 'out of the window'. (3)

He is alone in his prison cell and wants to find out what is going on outside (1) but as a political prisoner is not allowed to communicate openly with other prisoners (1) so he holds the mirror outside the window, in the corridor, so that he can see what is happening further down the corridor (1).

2. Explain the effect of the use of the word 'travels' in line 10. (2)

This implies that the bunched fingers representing the 'badge' move slowly and carefully up into position on the imaginary 'cap' (1). We find ourselves imagining the image as if we are seeing it through the speaker's eyes – it creates a vivid image of what is being communicated (1).

3. Refer to lines 16–18: ‘A finger ... his work’.

What does this tell us about the manner in which the prisoners communicate with each other? (2)

The prisoner knows that the warders must not notice any change in the rhythm or speed of his work (1) but he is so skilled at this method of communicating that he can make the gesture for ‘Later’ without any disruption (1).

4. Describe the tone of the communication between the warder and the prisoner. (3)

The warder speaks in an abrupt, disrespectful manner (1) that shows his power over the prisoners (1). To avoid any conflict the prisoner replies in a respectful manner, using the word ‘baas’ (1).

5. Explain the relevance of the layout of the poem. (3)

The lines on the left side of the page form the narrative in which the speaker explains what he sees (1). On the far right of the page the speaker translates the messages for the reader (1). The warder’s sudden question to the prisoner is placed in the middle of the page, suggesting that it is an unwelcome intrusion in the ‘conversation’ between the two comrades (1).

6. Discuss the effectiveness of the last three words of the poem. (2)

The final message given by the prisoner is one of solidarity and support, reinforcing the idea expressed in the title of the poem (1). It ends the poem with an inspirational image as a ‘black fist’ also represents black power – the determination of the South African people to achieve freedom from oppression (1).

[10]

SECTION C: EXAMPLE OF AN ESSAY QUESTION

Essay question

Cronin’s poem ‘Motho Ke Motho Ka Batho Babang’ demonstrates his belief that we need the support of others, and close communication with others, in order to maintain our humanity.

By close reference to the **diction**, **imagery** and **tone** used in this poem, critically discuss this statement.

Your response should take the form of a well-constructed essay of 250–300 words (about ONE page).

[10]

Here are some pointers to help you deal with the three key elements in your essay: diction, imagery and tone:

- **Diction:** When referring to diction you need to look for words that arouse emotion or are very obviously positive or negative in connotation. In this poem, however, the diction is neutral – the words are ordinary and informal. Instead, Afrikaans is used to show the power relations between the prisoners and the warder.
- **Imagery:** Identify the ways in which the poet tries to give us a clear picture of what he is talking about. For example, when describing the prisoner's fingers he says "and wiggle like two antennae" (line 14) and he describes this hand as "the talkative one" (line 24).
- **Tone:** When referring to tone, you should deal with the feelings and attitudes conveyed by the text. Try to imagine what tone of voice the speaker would use if he/she were speaking aloud to you. In this poem the tone is intimate as the speaker shares with the reader his secret conversation of signs with his fellow prisoner.

RESOURCE: X-KIT ACHIEVE

The poem begins with an image of complete isolation – a prisoner alone in a cell, not allowed to communicate with other prisoners. To try and make some contact with others, he uses his mirror to see what is going on outside. The prisoner he sees in the corridor begins a silent communication with him by means of gestures.

The speaker gives us a clear picture of the **images** he observes: the fingers that '*Bunch together*' to show '*An object ... badge*' on the '*imaginary cap*' of a warder; the two fingers making a '*vee*' and wiggling '*like two antennae*' to show he is being watched; the moving '*watch-hand's arc*', to show they will speak later; and finally the clenched fist to indicate solidarity and support. All these images are understood perfectly by the speaker and in spite of his solitude he feels supported and comforted; part of a caring community.

The **diction** used by the poet is simple and informal. The conversation between the two prisoners is confined to silent gestures expressing simple yet powerful ideas ('*A warder.*'; '*Later.*'; '*Strength brother*'). Similarly, the speaker's narrative uses simple words to describe what he saw ('*There's a person down there*'; '*He's being watched*'; '*In my mirror, A black fist*') but this was clearly a moving and important experience for him. This suggests that closeness and communication between people does not have to be complicated – we merely have to be understood and supported.

The **tone** of the poem is also informal and conversational, almost intimate. The speaker tells us every detail of what he sees so that we are drawn into the silent yet satisfying conversation, as if we are participants. He mentions the imaginary badge '*Which travels ... forehead*' and we find ourselves watching in our imaginations.

The poet thus uses an informal, intimate tone and simple diction to convey a series of powerful images that show us clearly how the prisoners maintained a community that allowed them to feel that they had not been deprived of their humanity.

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