



ENGLISH HL

09 March 2024

GRADE 12 POETRY NOTES ON: Talk to the peach tree

TALK TO THE PEACH TREE SIPHO SEPAMLA

- 1 Let's talk to the swallows visiting us in summer
- 2 ask how it is in other countries

- 3 Let's talk to the afternoon shadow
- 4 ask how the day has been so far

- 5 Let's raise our pets to our level
- 6 ask them what they don't know of us

- 7 words have lost meaning
- 8 like all notations they've been misused

- 9 most people will admit
- 10 a whining woman can overstate her case

- 11 Talk to the paralysing heat in the air
- 12 inquire how long the mercilessness will last

- 13 Let's pick out items from the rubbish heap
- 14 ask how the stench is like down there

- 15 Let's talk to the peach tree
- 16 find out how it feels to be in the ground

- 17 Let's talk to the moon going down
- 18 ask if it isn't enough eyeing what's been going on

- 19 come on
- 20 let's talk to the devil himself
- 21 it's about time

Poet – Siphos Sepamla

Siphos Sepamla (1932 – 2007) was born in a township near Krugersdorp into a family of educators. He became a teacher but, after experiencing Sharpeville (1960) first-hand when teaching there, he left the profession. He founded FUBA – the Federated Union of Black Artists which gave voice to black artists of all disciplines. It functioned successfully until 1997. He also edited both a literary and a theatre magazine. Sepamla has an individual voice. His poems work on irony, satire and humour, qualities not often found in the poets of the era who were politically loud and

emotionally consciousness-raising. This poem was written during the Apartheid years. Sepamla uses it to voice his opinion on the political talks that took place between various parties before the formalised end of Apartheid. Sepamla and his group saw the pen as ‘the bomb’ which could be ‘used to fight against apartheid and social injustice. The negotiations between the various parties were ultimately successful and South Africa became a democratic state in 1994. The speaker’s peace-making/peaceful attitude is clear in “it’s about time”, in the last line.

Diction

Word	Meaning
swallows	long distance migrant birds found in most countries.
Countries	Nations
Notations	Representations/codes (symbols words phrases)
Misused	Misrepresented (not used for the reason they were intended.
Admit	Agree
Whining woman	Woman who complains continuously
Paralysing heat	Extreme heat that hinders you from doing anything
Mercilessness	Cruel
Rubbish heap	Dumpsite
Eyeing	Observing

Summary:

The speaker wittily makes a series of rather odd (absurd, even) suggestions about with whom to discuss politics – from the birds, shadows, pets, the peach tree and the air itself. He ends the poem on a serious note and states that the “devil himself” should be addressed. This refers to the leaders of the Apartheid government.

Form/Structure:

Free verse – no recognisable poetic form. There is, however, a pattern in stanzas 3,7,8 and 9. They all have the same pattern of word choice, length and content. The indents in the fourth and fifth stanzas alerts the reader to the fact that these stanzas are, in fact, commentary on the overall situation. The **repetition** of the word ‘**talk**’ **six times highlights the need for dialogue between the oppressor and the oppressed.** There is an indent in the last stanza this serves to visually highlight the message of the poem.

Analysis

THE TITLE

The peach tree appears in several of Sepamla’s poems. The Peach Tree is about the tree in his garden and in ***The Will***, it is one of his possessions which he wittily

bequeaths to his children, while making subtle comments about life under the apartheid system.

LINES 1-6

Let's talk to the swallows visiting us in summer / ask how it is in other countries / Let's talk to the afternoon shadow / ask how the day has been so far / Let's raise our pets to our level / ask them what they don't know of us

The literal actions are quite absurd: talking to pets, the afternoon shadow and pets. It is amusing to expect 'our pets' who have been raised to human level to be able to answer the serious question: what do you know of us? The absurdity creates humour.

However, the underlying message is serious: what do you (especially the whites) know about us? During Apartheid there was little or no opportunity to understand or communicate with people from other races. One group of people was always superior and had a 'voice', whilst the other had to remain silent.

LINES 7-10

words have lost meaning / like all notations they've been misused / most people will admit / a whining woman can overstate her case

The lines are indented to show that these stanzas are commentaries and indicates a difference. Also, the casual sounding repetitive '**Let's talk**' of the previous lines has been dropped. These words must be taken seriously.

He states that '**words have lost their meaning**' – this means that talking has become useless. Attempts to negotiate change with the apartheid government had failed. Instead, more repressive measures had been introduced to suppress the Blacks.

'**Misused notations**' refers to communication tools which have become so warped that their original intentions have become lost. Words have literally lost their meaning. Language has been twisted and used to convey lies, propaganda and cannot be trusted.

'**Whining**' has negative connotations of high-pitched complaining, without valid reason. The words of line 10 are a reminder of the saying: 'the lady doth protest too much'. By emotionally overdoing a statement ('overstate her case') the real meaning is lost and the words are felt to be insincere.

LINES 11-12

Talk to the paralysing heat in the air / inquire how long the mercilessness will last

paralysing – implies that the oppression (the heat) renders a person unable to do anything. Also refers to their pain and suffering.

Merciless – emphasises the effects of apartheid: no empathy/mercy/compassion for the oppressed people.

This is symbolic of the position Black people were in during apartheid. They were prisoners in a harsh and unforgiving situation.

LINES 13-14

Let's pick out items from the rubbish heap / ask how the stench is like down there

The words '**rubbish heap**', '**stench**' and '**down there**' relate to the way Black people were regarded by the authorities: rubbish that was to be thrown away, something that created a bad smell or 'stench'. The tone is serious and the intention is to describe the reality of the situation of Black people.

LINES 15-16

Let's talk to the peach tree / find out how it feels to be in the ground

The peach tree is rooted in a permanent place in the garden, unlike the other items/things he proposed with which to have a conversation. The tree will tell him how it feels to be rooted and fruitful in a place you can call your own. The connotation of rooted is permanence and fruitful implies productive and successful. The peach tree has land that it belongs to. Blacks did not have land; they were not even regarded as citizens. They have no sense of belonging.

LINES 17-18

Let's talk to the moon going down / ask if it isn't enough eyeing what's been going on

moon going down – the light of the moon will disappear as it '**goes down**'. This is symbolic of them losing hope.

The moon is **personified**. It is aware of their situation (**eyeing**). The setting of the moon will lead to daylight. Daylight is associated with a new day, new hope. Their situation is visible to the whole world but nobody has done anything to effectively change their situation. The new day does not bring new hope for them.

LINES 19-21

come on / let's talk to the devil himself /it's about time

The lines are indented, just as lines 7-10 are, in order to make them stand out. The indents alert the reader to the fact that these lines are commentary on the overall situation.

come on – he is encouraging himself and others

devil – the oppressors /the Apartheid System

it's about time – The time has come to speak directly to the powers who have been oppressing the Black people for too long.

There is a change in the tone in the last three lines. There is a sense of reluctance and helplessness – for so long there has been no communication. He knows that

this conversation is long overdue and needs to happen to facilitate change. This could relate to the announcement that Nelson Mandela was going to be released. Talking was a way to work for change, without physical injury. It was time for negotiations.

Tone :

- Absurd, cynical
- Despair
- Frustration

Mood

- Apprehensive
- anxious

Themes:

Overall theme:

- Open channel of communication is the overall theme in this poem.
- The speaker encourages the oppressed people to exhaust all peaceful forms of communication for them to address apartheid. Please note that the freedom of expression and association for black people at the time was restricted, hence 'talking to the peach tree' first, not the government of the time.
- The speaker is of the view that ideas from all sorts of people should be accommodated or considered.

Sub Themes

- Emancipation of the oppressed.
- Patriotism
- Freedom of speech
- Rebellion

Question 1: Essay

In the poem "***Talk to the Peach Tree***", the speaker reflects on the predicament facing people who are subjected to the harsh realities of life in South Africa during apartheid. With close reference to diction, imagery and tone, discuss the validity of this statement in relation to the poem.

Your response should be in the form of a well-constructed essay of 250-300 words (about 1 page)

TOTAL :10 Marks

Suggested Answer for Question 1 : Essay

The following are points that could be included in in your essay:

Use the following points, among others, as a guideline to answering this question. In this poem, the speaker reflects on the harsh realities of life in South Africa under apartheid rule.

- The oppressive laws of the apartheid government restricted the freedom of movement and speech – there was a restriction on the number of people who could gather at any specific time. This hindered communication amongst those who opposed the apartheid regime.
- Since the oppressed were not permitted to express their feelings and opinions freely, they had to find other ways to do so.
- Throughout the poem, the speaker alludes to various ways in which politics was discussed, thereby highlighting the irrational laws that suppressed all those who opposed apartheid.
- The speaker uses personification in stating that there should be talks with the '**swallows**', '**shadow**' etc.
- to highlight his message on the different ways of communication during apartheid.
- The speaker refers to the '**swallows**' that fly in from other countries. The swallows represent the people who visited South Africa from the outside world. They symbolise freedom of movement which is in direct contrast to the lack of freedom of the majority of South Africans who were not exposed to the outside world. The government's propaganda machine and censorship also controlled the narrative of the regime that wanted to curtail the actions of the 'terrorists' and 'communists'.
- The word '**summer**' symbolises optimism, positivity and hope for the future.
- In stanza 2, the poet reflects on the time of day ('**afternoon shadow**') when people gather to discuss their progress, however, they do not discuss their ideas for change.
- The theme of talk versus action is highlighted in the poem. There seems to be very little progress in finding a resolution to the crisis in South Africa. It is a country in which animals ('**pets**') seem to have more freedom than humans.
- Due to censorship of the media, there are mixed messages being sent to the citizens of South Africa as well as to the outside world. Hence, '**words have lost meaning**'.
- People tend to ignore what is being said when there is constant '**whining**' as these complaints fall on deaf ears. There is no progress in addressing the plight of South Africans who are victims of oppressive laws. The speaker uses alliteration in '**whining woman**' to highlight this point.
- The '**paralysing heat**' is a reference to the harsh laws that subjugate the majority of South Africans. It highlights the brutality ('**mercilessness**') of the forces that protected the apartheid regime.
- The '**rubbish heap**' reflects the futility of economic disempowerment that has been orchestrated by the apartheid government. The oppressed have to resort to surviving on hand-me-downs.

- The peach tree is a symbol of communication and stability. It is ever-present and people are free to express themselves. It is a place of safety and confession where their secrets were safe.
- The moon (**'moon going down'**) is a sign of constant change. It symbolizes nature and the passing and return of its seasons. This image pinpoints moral instability, the changing heart, the gullible mind, and our frequently vacillating resolve. It shows how people have lost faith in their ability to voice their opposition to the unjust laws in the country and to passively accept their fate.
- There is a dramatic shift in tone in the final three lines of the poem when the speaker resolves to address the **'devil'** which is the **personification of evil**. It is seen as a hostile, cruel and destructive force. The speaker alludes to the apartheid government as forces of evil as they were responsible for the atrocities and suppression of all those who opposed its policies.
- It is a show of bravado in confronting the apartheid regime head on to reach a negotiated settlement and, thereby, eventually freeing themselves from the yolk of subjugation. This direct approach to taking decisive action in resolving the human rights abuses in South Africa is in stark contrast to the actions of the 'whining woman'

Questions and Answers

1. Explain the underlying meaning of the actions/instructions in lines 1-6. (2)
(Although the literal actions are quite absurd, the underlying message is serious: what do you know about us?)
During Apartheid there was little or no opportunity to understand or communicate with people from other races. One group of people was always superior and had a 'voice', whilst the other had to remain silent.)
2. Why would swallows be a good source of information about 'other countries'? (2)
(Swallows migrate for the summer. They would be able to 'talk' about the other countries.)
3. Discuss what the speaker is saying in stanza 4. (3)
(He states that 'words have lost their meaning' – this means that talking has become useless.
'Misused notations' refers to communication tools which have become so warped that their original intentions have become lost. Words have literally lost their meaning. Language has been twisted and used to convey lies, propaganda and cannot be trusted.)
4. Discuss the connotations of the word "whining" (line 10). (2)
('Whining' has negative connotations of high-pitched complaining. This would be unpleasant.)
5. Why does the speaker describe the heat as "paralysing" and "merciless" (stanza 6)? (2)

(paralysing – implies that the oppression (the heat) renders a person unable to do anything. ‘merciless’ implies exactly that – no empathy/mercy/compassion for the oppressed people.)

6. Although similar in style to stanzas 1-3, how do lines 11-14 differ in tone and intent from lines 1-6? (3)

(Stanzas 1-3 were light-hearted and humorous in their absurdity. Lines 11-14 is anything but humorous. The heat is ‘merciless’ which alludes to the oppression faced by Black people during Apartheid. The tone is harsh and unforgiving. The words ‘rubbish heap’ and ‘stench’ implies the attitude towards black people. The tone is serious and the intention is the describe the reality of the situation for black people under white oppression.)

7. Discuss why the speaker chooses to “talk to the peach tree”. Consider the other ‘things or concepts he talks about in the poem. (3)

(The peach tree is rooted in a permanent place in the garden, unlike the other items/things he proposed with which to have a conversation. The tree will tell him how it feels to be rooted and fruitful in a place you can call your own. The connotation of rooted is permanence and fruitful implies productive and successful.)

8. Identify and comment on the tone in the last stanza. (3)

(The tone could be one of relief – for so long there has been no communication. Now the speaker looks forward to a conversation between the two parties. This conversation, albeit with the devil himself, is long overdue and needs to happen to facilitate change. The speaker implores the reader to have the needed conversation.)

9. Who is the ‘devil’ in the last stanza? (1)

(Oppressors / Apartheid System)

10. How is the register of the poem appropriate and effective in delivering its message? (2)

(The colloquial register is lighter and less demanding than formal register. It gives the poem a tone much like a casual conversation. The poet addresses the reader directly and engages them with the pronouns “us” in “Let’s”. Sepamla’s style of criticism is subtle and accessible to all readers. The message is clearly that decent conversations need to happen between white and black people and that all should be treated fairly and equally. People must see all things from BOTH perspectives.)