



GRADE 12 ENGLISH HL

POETRY NOTES: At a Funeral

14 February 2026

Notes Compiled by Ms J.Govender

3. At a funeral

Dennis Brutus

AT A FUNERAL – DENNIS BRUTUS

- 1 Black, green and gold at sunset: pageantry
- 2 And stubbled graves: expectant, of eternity,
- 3 In bride's-white, nun's-white veils the nurses gush their bounty
- 4 Of red-wine cloaks, frothing the bugled dirging slopes
- 5 Salute! Then ponder all this hollow panoply
- 6 For one whose gifts the mud devours, with our hopes.

- 7 Oh all you frustrate ones, powers tombed in dirt,
- 8 Aborted, not by Death but carrion books of birth
- 9 Arise! The brassy shout of Freedom stirs our earth;
- 10 Not death but death's-head tyranny scythes our ground
- 11 And plots our narrow cells of pain defeat and dearth:
- 12 Better that we should die, than that we should lie down

Poet – Dennis Brutus

Brutus (Coloured Descent) was born in Zimbabwe but grew up in South Africa. He was a graduate of the University of Fort Hare. He taught English and Afrikaans at several high schools in South Africa after 1948, but was eventually dismissed for his vocal criticism of apartheid. He was banned for his political activities. While in Mozambique, he was arrested and returned to South Africa where, while trying to escape, he was shot. Brutus was sent to Robben Island for 16 months. He was in the cell next to Nelson Mandela's. After his release Brutus left South Africa and went into exile in Britain. He was eventually "unbanned" by the South African government in 1990 and returned to South Africa, based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He later settled in Cape Town, where he died of prostate cancer on 26 December 2009.

Diction

Word	Meaning
Pageantry	Elaborate display or ceremony
Stubbled	Small, sticking out, protruding, rough
Expectant	Expecting, rising up
Eternity	Timeless, infinite or unending in time
Gush	Fast flowing

Bounty	Generosity
Frothing anger	Froth from the mouth because of illness or excitement
Bugled	Played on a bugle - trumpet like musical instrument usually at funerals
Dirging	Playing a funeral song
Ponder	Think about something carefully
Hollow	Empty or meaningless
Panoply	An impressive display/collection
Devours	Swallows/completely destroys
Carrion	Rotting flesh of dead animal
Brassy	Brass musical instrument like a trumpet
Death's head	Human skull, symbol of mortality and death
Tyranny	Cruel/oppressive government/use of power.
Scythes	Cuts down
Dearth	Scarcity/lack of something

Summary:

It's about a young woman called Valencia Majombozi, an African woman who managed to qualify as a doctor after enormous hardship and sacrifice by her parents. She got her medical degree and then, by an incredible irony, just after Valencia had completed her internship, she died during the Sharpeville Massacre. The speaker went to her funeral. The poem is about the years of sacrifice that end in nothing, and you could read the poem entirely on that level or just as an expression of frustrated and aborted hopes. Oppressed people cannot live their lives fully! He urges active resistance – “Arise!”. He ultimately states that death is a better fate than yielding to “defeat and death”.

Form/Structure:

There are two equal stanzas and a specific rhyme scheme (aaabab, cccdc) in this poem. The formality of the poem mirrors the formal rites and rituals of a funeral ceremony.

Analysis:

Title

At a funeral

The poem is a tribute to Valencia Majombozi. This makes it personal: the poet refers to a specific person and has a greater impact on the reader. ***‘shortly after qualifying’*** – Emphasises that all her dreams and hopes have been destroyed by death. This conveys a sense of frustration and aborted hopes.

LINE 1

Black, green and gold at sunset: pageantry

The poem is operating on a political level. The resistance movement in South Africa has its own flag, as opposed to the State flag; the resistance movement's flag is black, green and gold. The choice of those colours at the beginning of the poem is not an accident. Also, many of the colleagues of this doctor attended her funeral wearing their university robes; these were black caps and gowns, but often with a gold hood indicating an arts degree, green indicating a science degree; so again, you have a combination of black, green and gold.

at sunset – the end of the day which is symbolic of death. Creates **sombre mood**.
Connotations of darkness and sadness.

Pageantry – the flag is part of a ceremonial display, a formal ceremony with symbolic clothing and rituals. This creates the impression that it is just for show, because all of that does not matter now as all hopes and dreams are lost with her death.

LINE 2

And stubbled graves: expectant, of eternity,

stubble – stubble is the stalks of crops left sticking out after a harvest, or the remains of a person's beard left on their face after shaving. This implies that the **graves were in a state of neglect** and they looked untidy/unkept as they are covered in dead grass stalks.

expectant, – the graveyard is portrayed as being **hungry (Personification) for more bodies** as death is inevitable. This emphasises that we all have to die. /The grave is personified as an expectant mother waiting for her child.

of eternity – ambiguous: either the dead will remain in their graves for an eternity, or the belief that the afterlife will not end.

LINES 3-4

In bride's-white, nun's-white veils the nurses gush their bounty Of red-wine cloaks, frothing the bugled dirging slopes

Nurses from the hospital attended the funeral. In South Africa the nurses wore cloaks which were lined with bright red - the "red-wine." Other nurses at the funeral wore white, which echo the nuns in their habits "In **bride'-white, nun 's-white veils.**" The nurses in the hospital are willing to give everything to save the lives of those who fight for liberation. The connotations of "brides" and "nuns" implies innocence, **purity, holiness** and a new life.

Gush – flow out fast. **Bounty** – refers to something in **abundance**. Many people are showing their grief.

Frothing highlights the number of nurses.

"the bugled dirging." This suggests that it was a **military funeral**.

Slopes – means going up / down. This could be the sound of the bugle. The slopes around the graveyard are also personified, as though the land itself is mourning the young doctor.

LINE 5

Salute! Then ponder all this hollow panoply

Salute! – means to honour, or literally salute the dead, as one would a soldier. **Gesture of respect**. The '!' emphasises that this is a **command**.

Panoply – a **splendid display**. This is a **meaningless** ceremony with flags and speeches. Meaningless because **it changes nothing**.

The speaker asks the reader to contemplate the implications of this funeral, and death in general. He encourages the reader to look further than the display (**funeral flowers, all the people, the sad music** etc), which **lacks sincerity**

LINE 6

For one whose gifts the mud devours, with our hopes.

'**one**' refers to Valencia Majombozi. (deceased). '**Gifts**' refers to her ability as a **doctor** to heal and bring comfort to others.

Devour - eat greedily, hungrily or quickly. The mud of a graveyard is compared to a hungry mouth. The **personification** emphasises that all her hopes and those of her people are now buried in the earth. **Tone of despair/sadness.**

LINE 7

Oh all you frustrate ones, powers tombed in dirt,

The poet uses **Apostrophe** (Figure of Speech) as he addresses the dead directly.

Frustrate – to prevent the success of something or to cause irritation and anger by preventing dreams from being realised. They are powerful enough to **cause frustration (to the government) rather than being passively frustrated.**

The dead are described as **powers tombed in dirt** -their **potential is buried** because of their deaths.

LINE 8

Aborted, not by Death but carrion books of birth

"**aborted**" – Ending of life before it has begun

"carrion books of birth, " - the life of a Black person begins as a kind of death. From the moment of birth you're given this **Pass Book**, so that you cease to be a human being from the point of birth. You are devoured. You become **carrion- dead flesh**. This ties in with the **notion of abortion**. The poet regards the Black people as being dead, not because they died, but because their freedom is taken away due to oppression and the pass books. The apartheid government is even more cruel and deadly than death itself - it is not Death that kills people, but the **passbook ("books of birth")** which symbolises the **cruel apartheid laws**.

Aborted – abortion is the deliberate ending of pregnancy by killing an unborn foetus. The dead are described as being "aborted" (i.e., killed before they could live), not by Death but by "books of birth" (a reference/allusion to the dompas or passbooks).

"**Death**" with a capital letter - Death is **personified**.

LINE 9

Arise! The brassy shout of Freedom stirs our earth;

The dead are addressed directly and told to rebel or "**Arise!**" against the government.

- literally - Stand up but also a reference to "rise up!" which means "**Start a revolution!**" – another command, **defiant tone**. **Freedom** is capitalised to show that it is important, as it is **personified** as shouting to wake the dead. Describing Freedom's shout as "brassy" refers to the bugle in line 4, which was used to play the "dirge". Here, music does not send the dead to their rest, but awakens them.

LINE 10

Not death but death's-head tyranny scythes our ground

It's helpful to know the symbol of "**death's-head tyranny.**" The insignia used by Nazis was skull and crossbones. The Nazis are regarded as great heroes by the South African regime and people imitate them. The Nazis are the model for how one should behave if you are a white in South Africa.

Death – is personified as the **Grim Reaper** with his scythe (a harvesting tool, used to "harvest" or collect the dead). The poet compares the South African apartheid government to the **death-head wearing Nazis in World War 2.**

Tyrant – a ruthless and cruel dictator. According to the poet, Death is not destroying South Africa, but "**death-head tyranny**".

Scythes – to cut something violently

Our ground – is a reference to the land, where the **Group Areas** act excluded people of colour.

LINE 11

And plots our narrow cells of pain defeat and dearth –

Plots – **pun**: a small piece of land (e.g., a plot where a **grave** is dug) or to "plot" - to **plan** something, often something evil.

Narrow cells of pain – could be the **graves** in a graveyard, the **prison cells** where prisoners of the apartheid government had been jailed, or the **small houses** in disadvantaged areas that people of colour had been forced to live in, as a result of the Group Areas Act.

Dearth – things that are in short supply (e.g., food or basic necessities).

The poet implies that **pain, suffering** and death was **deliberately caused by the apartheid government.**

LINE 12

Better that we should die, than that we should lie down –

lie down – if a person "**lies down**" when attacked or arrested, they show that they are **surrendering** or submitting. The poet implies that it is better for people to resist apartheid and die, rather than give up or surrender. There is **no full stop** after "**we should lie down**". This implies that there is **no end** to resistance and no surrender.

This line also implies that the poet has **come to terms** with the tragedy of the young doctor's death - she died, rather than choosing to "**lie down**" or surrender to apartheid, and the poet sees this as "**better**".

The poet uses "**we**" and therefore identifies with the struggle against apartheid.

Poetic Devices:

- Personification in lines 2 and 6. (Graves expecting their content; hungry mud) – the earth seems hostile.
- Use of various capital letters – draws attention and emphasises the words.
- Exclamation points (Salute! and Arise!) suggest strong emotions – call to arms.

Tone

- Stanza 1 – Calm and Reverent
- Stanza 2 – Anger & Contemptuous

Mood:

Stanza 1- melancholic (sad)

Stanza 2 - vengeful

Themes:

- Criticises oppression.
- Call to arms: people should get up and fight
- Frustrated and aborted hopes
- Years of Sacrifice that end in nothing
- Aborted Hopes
- The fight against injustice
- Desire for freedom
- Human Sacrifice for a cause

QUESTION 1

In the poem ‘At a Funeral’, the poet depicts his desire to honour the legacy of those who have sacrificed their lives in their fight for freedom and calls for decisive action against the incessant oppression by the structures of apartheid.

With close reference to diction, imagery and tone, critically discuss the validity of this statement.

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

Suggested Answer for Question 1: Essay

Use the following points, among others, as a guideline to answering this question.

- In this poem, the poet pays tribute to a young lady, Valencia Majombozi, who was killed by apartheid forces during the Sharpeville massacre while protesting against the oppressive Pass Laws.
- The poet depicts the rich array of colour that adorned the funeral ceremony. The funeral ceremony is dignified with an elaborate display of colour(‘pageantry’), of a fallen hero who was killed while fighting for her freedom. This bears testimony to the poet’s respect for the deceased who symbolises the powerful resilient spirit of young people who stood firm in their opposition to oppressive laws during the apartheid regime.
- In stanza1, there is a rich medley of colour from the ‘black, green and gold’ which represents the flag of the resistance movement to the colleagues of this doctor who attended her funeral wearing their university robes "In bride'-white, nun 's-white veils."

- Also, the nurses wore cloaks which are lined with bright red (the "red-wine."). Other nurses at the funeral wore white, which echo the nuns in their habits "In bride'-white, nun 's-white veils."
- The poet mourns the loss of a young person who had enormous talent and potential which have now gone to waste. She has become a symbol of resistance to the harsh apartheid laws that restricted the freedom of black people in South Africa. Throughout stanza 1, there is a melancholic mood as the poet joins the other mourners in paying their respects to the deceased.
- The tone in stanza 1 is calm and reverent which is in keeping with the poet's admiration for the deceased.
- However, in stanza 2, there is a huge shift in tone as the poet makes a strong political statement and renews his commitment to the fight for freedom in South Africa. His tone is commanding('Arise'), angry ('enraged') and contemptuous ('carrion books of death') i.e. the Pass laws which dictated the lives of black people and restricted their freedom of movement.
- The poet stresses that humans were reduced to dead flesh ('carrion'). From the moment of birth, a black person was given this Pass Book, so that they would cease to be human beings from the point of birth. Thus, they would become 'carrion' or dead flesh. This ties in with the notion of abortion.
- The symbolism of "death's-head tyranny" is reminiscent of the power of the Nazis in Germany who were extremely powerful in destroying their opposition. Their army tanks that rolled through the streets of Berlin with the insignia of skull and crossbones was cheered wildly by their supporters. The poet suggests that similar methods were employed by the apartheid regime to suppress opposition to their policies. The poet's experience of political repression and his opposition to apartheid impart force and breadth to his poetry.
- The final line of the poem "Better that we should die, than we should lie down" is ominous as the poet is motivated by the deaths of all those who have sacrificed their lives in the struggle against apartheid. He honours the bravery of those who have fought selflessly against the injustices perpetrated by the apartheid regime which was responsible for the destruction of lives/dreams/hopes of people.

Questions and Answers

At a Funeral

Dennis Brutus

1. To what does "pageantry" refer in line 1? Discuss the effectiveness of this choice of word. (2)

(Pageantry refers to a splendid scene filled with colours and costumes, movement and sound. It is an effective choice of word if one considers that the poet feels that this funeral is all just for "show".)

2. What do the words "Black, green and gold" suggest? How does this shift the reading of the poem? (2)

(These are the colours of the ANC and makes the reader see the poem in a political light. The poem is both personal and political.) Personal level – graduates attended the funeral – garb.

3. Why would the graves be expectant of 'eternity' (line 2)? (2)
(The graves are 'waiting' for the dead bodies who will be buried and stay there forever.)
4. Explain the reference to "hope" as it is used in line 6. (2)
(Hopes for the future – the fulfilment of life by Valencia. Could also suggest a sense of hopelessness – "what was all of this for?" The poet speaks of "our hopes" – inclusive of the reader.)
5. What are "carrion books of birth"? (2)
(Passbooks carried by all non-white people. Carrion (meat/dead being) - refers to the people not actually being dead, but dead-like due to oppression.)
6. Comment on the tone in "Arise!" and "Salute!". (3)
A commanding tone is used. Salute! – gesture of respect which must be given to Those who selflessly devoted themselves to the struggle. Arise! is a command. The poet uses a tone of defiance. People need not merely surrender but fight the apartheid government.
7. Why does the speaker call on the reader to "ponder" (line 5)? (2)
(The speaker asks the reader to contemplate the implications of this funeral, and death in general. He encourages the reader to look further than the 'showcase'/display.)
8. What is the difference between "Death" and "death's head" and why is "scythes our ground" an appropriate metaphor? (3)
(Death is personified – it is the mortal end of life. Death is often portrayed as a cloaked skeleton carrying a scythe – the cutting of life. A death's head is a skull. Here is refers to the tyranny of a system that cuts down the lives of black people. So 'scythes' is an effective metaphor.)
9. Discuss the pun in the word "plots" in line 11. (3)
(It can be a verb – to plot is to make a secret plan to destroy someone or something. In this context the political system makes plans to contain the black people in 'narrow cells. These could be prison cells or graves. Plots could also refer to literal graves.)
10. Describe the tone in and the effectiveness of the last line of the poem. (3)
(It is a commanding/defiant tone. He states that it is better to die than to "lie down" – to submit to oppressive powers. He encourages the reader/his people to fight against oppression. It is forceful and honest conclusion in response to the funeral of Valencia.)
11. How does the reader know that this poem is more than a tribute to Valencia Majombozi? Discuss the effectiveness of this added message/theme. (3)
(There is a definite mourning for this specific individual, but the speaker encourages the reader to think beyond that. He addresses the concept of death in general and the waste of life if a life is cut short, before a person reached full potential. He also uses the second stanza as a "call to arms" of sorts. He states that it is better to die than to submit to the powers of oppression.)