



GRADE 12 ENGLISH HL

POETRY NOTES: The child who was shot dead by soldiers in Nyanga 7 February 2026

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Poet - Ingrid Jonker

- Born 1933; Died 1965
- (Afrikaans) South African
- She had a traumatic childhood and adulthood. Her poetry often expresses her personal traumas, as well as the societal and familial injustices she perceived around her.
- She was a member of "Die Sestigers", a group of anti-establishment poets and writers who challenged the conservative literary norms and censorship of the 1950s and 60s in South Africa.

- She posthumously (after her death) received the Order of Ikhamanga for her contribution to literature and commitment to the struggle for human rights.

Historical Context:

Jonker wrote protest poetry in Afrikaans, in the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre. (The **Sharpeville massacre** occurred on 21 March 1960 at the police station in the township of Sharpeville in the then Transvaal Province of the then Union of South Africa (today part of Gauteng). After demonstrating against pass laws, a crowd of about **7000 protesters went to the police station**. Sources disagree about the behaviour of the crowd; some stated that the crowd was peaceful, while others stated that the crowd had been hurling stones at the police, and that the mood had turned "ugly". The South African Police opened fire on the crowd when the crowd started advancing toward the fence around the police station, after the tear-gas had proved ineffectual. There were 249 victims in total, including 29 children, with 69 people killed and 180 injured. Some were shot in the back as they fled.

Writing in *Drum* magazine about the poem, Jonker said: "I saw the mother as every mother in the world. I saw her as myself. I saw Simone (Jonker's own child) as the baby. I could not sleep. I thought of what the child might have been had he been allowed to live. I thought what could be reached, what could be gained by death? The child wanted no part in the circumstances in which our country is grasped... He only wanted to play in the sun at Nyanga... [The poem] grew out of my sense of bereavement."

Jack Cope and William Plomer translated the poem. In Afrikaans it is referred to as "Die Kind" (The Child). Nelson Mandela read an English translation at the opening of the democratic Parliament on 24 May 1994

Diction

Word	Meaning
Heather	A plant with small flowers
Siege	Attack
Saracens	An armoured car that is synonymous with Apartheid in South Africa
Pass	A permit issued to black people during Apartheid. It specified an area in which a black person may move/work/live.

Summary:

The poem reflects on the **pass laws of Apartheid South Africa**. Jonker wrote this poem in reaction to the shooting of a young child in his mother's arms during a protest against the Pass Laws. This happened in **Nyanga township, near Cape Town**. The child was killed while on his way to the doctor with his mother – the senselessness of his death is a result of the **senselessness of the Apartheid laws**. This child remains **nameless** to represent all **innocent lives taken during Apartheid**. The poem highlights the idea that violence within a country **destroys innocent** members of society (women and children) and damages the country and its **future**. This child's death has inspired others to take up the cause of freedom and given new energy to the struggle against Apartheid. Jonker yearns for a time when any child can grow and make his/her impact on the world, without restrictions of the Pass Laws.

Form/Structure:

Although this poem is separated into four sections, it is devoid of a specific rhyme scheme or rhythm. It is, therefore, in free verse. The isolated final line emphasises the poet's message: freedom is needed! The fourth stanza develops the idea of this **child's wasted life** – what he could have become, had he lived. There is a parallel structure in "nor at" repeated in the third

stanza. This rhetorical device gives examples of where police brutality occurred. It gives an **historical accuracy** to the poem.

Analysis

STANZA 1

LINE 1

The child is not dead

The repetition of “the child” throughout the poem emphasises the age and innocence of the youth and highlights how many children were killed because of the apartheid laws. This repetition is called an **anaphora**.

is not dead – **contradicts** the title: metaphorically he will live on by becoming a symbol. The child is a symbol of the growing sense of freedom in the hearts of people against the Apartheid System. The **child becomes a metaphor of resistance, hope and innocence**.

LINE 2

the child raises his fists against his mother

The poet’s diction conveys the distress of the child and others during the senseless Apartheid era.

“screams” and “raises his fists” highlights his anger.

fists – symbol of resistance and revolution: the diction conveys the **distress and the anger** of the child/the younger generation is rebelling.

Against his mother – the child is not happy with the parents’/the **older generations submissive attitude** – they did not fight hard enough. The resistance of the younger generation will not be passive.

LINES 3-4

who screams Africa screams the smell of freedom and heather

The repetition of “screams” emphasises his anger. The **mixing of the senses (synesthesia)** – one sense is described as another sense) adds emphasis. Highlights the emotional intensity and pain.

S-alliteration – emphasises the **urgency** and desperate cries of the oppressed people.

The **extended space** is used **instead of punctuation** between *Africa screams*. 1. Forces a pause increases the urgency of message. 2. Never-ending nature of struggle. 3. Free-flowing effect -cry for freedom. 4. Symbolizing Generational Gap.

Heather – a plant with small flowers. Jonker **connects freedom to the smell of flowers**; freedom will be like the sweet scent of flowers.

LINE 5

in the locations of the heart under siege

locations – **pun**: black townships or where something is located. The child’s message (aspirations of the black population) will continue in the heart of the people.

heart under siege – people who are oppressed or segregated from the mainstream.

STANZA 2

LINE 6

The child raises his fists against his father

The younger generation **rebels not only against the system but also against the older generation**. The reference to a different parent (line 2) emphasises the generation gap; that it is now the time of the youth to take up the fight.

LINE 7

in the march of the generations

march – alludes to military action

generations – the younger people were prepared to go further; they were prepared to use violence. Many joined the ANC military arm, uMkhonto we Sizwe.

LINES 8-9

who scream Africa scream the smell of justice and blood

The repetition of line 3 emphasises their **anger, the desperate cries** of the oppressed people and **urgency to fight. of justice and blood** – The younger generation is willing to spill blood/sacrifice their lives for their freedom.

LINE 10

in the streets of his armed pride

in the streets – They are prepared to fight against the soldiers who patrolled the townships. Also symbolic of a **popular revolt**.

armed pride – tone is very **passionate and inspiring**. Emphasises that they were willing to fight to restore their dignity (*pride*).

STANZA 3 LINE 11

The child is not dead

The repetition of line 1 emphasises that the child is **physically & medically dead, but not spiritually or poetically**.

LINES 12-13

neither at Langa nor at Nyanga

nor at Orlando nor at Sharpeville

Langa , Nyanga – Black townships in the Cape

Orlando , Sharpeville – Black townships in Gauteng

These were **sites of violent protests against Apartheid**. Also shows that protests had spread throughout the country. ***Sharpeville – allusion to the Sharpeville Massacre***

LINES 14-15

nor at the police station in Philippi

where he lies with a bullet in his head

Philippi – Cape Flats township where Jonker saw the body of the child that **prompted this poem**. The paradox highlights the fact that this child died physically, but he is **still alive in the hearts of all Africans. He becomes the symbol of innocence, resistance, and hope**.

STANZA 4

LINE 16

The child is the shadow of the soldiers

The metaphor compares the child to the shadow of soldiers. This is a warning/ reminder of the possibility of violence and that **hope for change lies with the youth**. Or it could refer to the idea

that the child is like a shadow that is present wherever soldiers gather. They cannot/ must not forget what they have done.

LINE 17

on guard with guns saracens and batons

Saracens – An armoured car that is synonymous with Apartheid in South Africa. The soldiers were fully equipped, showing that they would **use force to suppress Black people, not caring about who died, be it women or children**. Irony weapons were used against peaceful demonstrators. The authorities wanted to protect the status quo.

LINE 18

the child is present at all meetings and legislations

The death of the child is discussed by all people, the apartheid government and the Black people. The **apartheid government tried to introduce new laws (legislation)** while Black people were inspired to fight against the government.

LINE 19

the child peeps through the windows of houses and into the hearts of mothers

the child peeps through the windows – people will always remember and were determined that **it would not happen again. Sense of the reality of the situation – mothers lost their children.**

LINE 20

the child who just wanted to play in the sun at Nyanga is everywhere

Line 20 creates the image of a **child was an innocent victim**, he simply wanted to enjoy his childhood.

LINE 21

the child who became a man treks through all of Africa became a man – he grew up too quickly by taking on the responsibility of fighting for freedom. As a symbol, the child affects all aspects of life. The child, as a symbol, will become more powerful: will inspire the whole continent

LINE 22

the child who became a giant travels through the whole world

Giant – the child has become larger than life. The death of the child and others who fought for freedom has had a massive influence on the growing sense of freedom, justice and resistance by all those who are oppressed.

travels through the whole world – What happened to the child will have a global effect: many countries protested against the brutal and unjust system.

LINE 23

Without a pass

The last line of the poem forms the **coda**. A **coda is an epilogue that concludes a story**. This could be an entire chapter, a few paragraphs, lines, or a single sentence.) This conveys the final message and **irony of the poem: The dead do not require a pass**; you first have to die to walk around freely.

Pass refers to the **Apartheid ID document used to restrict movement of the black population**. This was the main reason for violent protests at Langa, Nyanga and Sharpeville.

The Pass system caused the death of the child, causing him to become a symbol, able to cross borders and continents unrestricted. **You cannot control the minds of people.**

Poetic Devices:

The repetition of “the child” throughout the poem emphasises the **age and innocence of the youth** and highlights how many children were killed because of the apartheid laws. This repetition is called an **anaphora**. The **child becomes a symbol of resistance, hope and innocence**. The child is a metaphor for the thought of resistance and, ultimately, freedom. In the second last stanza the child is a “**giant**” to portray the growing sense of freedom, justice and **resistance by all those who are oppressed**. This “giant” travels the **world – anti-Apartheid protests did not only take place in South Africa**. The world watched and protested the brutal and unjust system. The poet’s diction conveys the distress of the child and all others in the senseless Apartheid time. Her choice of “screams” and “raises his fists” highlights his anger.

The **alliteration** in lines 3 and 8 emphasises the **urgency and desperate cries of the oppressed people**. **Enjambment** creates a **free flow of thought**. There is an allusion to the **Bible (Gospel of Mark 38-43):** “³⁸ When they came to the home of the **synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly.** ³⁹ He went in and said to them, “**Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.**”) There are also **allusions** to all the places where protests turned violent, and people were injured/killed.

The **paradox** in the third stanza (“**the child is not dead ... where he lies with a bullet in his head**”) highlights the fact that this **child died physically, but he is still alive in the hearts of all Africans**. He becomes the symbol of innocence, resistance, and hope.

Tone :

The **tone** in the poem is bold, **passionate, inspired and determined**. Despite the sadness about the innocent child’s death, the tone is not sympathetic or sad. There is a sense of outrage and loss. The speaker remains determined in his/her message and relays it with a clarity of purpose.

Mood :

Hostile/ Unrelenting

Themes:

Freedom – ultimately the speaker dreams of a time when all people will be free. This freedom includes the freedom of speech, movement and in all human rights. Freedom from Apartheid and its brutal laws.

Resistance – This child stands up for what he knows is right and **he (the symbol) can never die. He is not a physical person, but an idea**. There is resistance against the blatant brutality and barbarism against the innocents. His raised fist symbolises the yearning for freedom, identity, and protest.

ESSAY QUESTION

The title of Jonker’s poem creates an expectation of a dead child. However, the contents of the poem contradict the title. In an essay of 250-300 words, discuss how this is done paying special attention to diction, tone and imagery

Suggested Answer for Question A: Essay

The title of the poem states that 'the child is dead' o The first line of the poem contradicts this by stating that 'the child is not dead'. o It portrays that the child is still alive by using double negatives. This line also contains a metaphor.

The sense of freedom is compared to a "child", growing inside one's mind. o Terms such as "fists", "freedom", "blood" and "scream" are meant for infusing the spirit of nationalism.

In this poem "The child who was shot dead by soldiers in Nyanga" begins with an allusion. The first line "The child is not dead" alludes to the fact that the poet refutes the death of the child. o According to the poet, their children cannot die. o They are still alive in their hearts an in the fight for justice and freedom.

"The child is not dead": Firstly, the child is a symbol of the growing sense of freedom in the South African's hearts against the Apartheid system.

The comparison is made between a 'child' to a thought of freedom.

The poet tries to convey that the child died physically, but he is still alive in her heart and the hearts of the Africans.

The third stanza begins with a repetition of the first line that acts as a refrain. It is meant for the sake of emphasizing the idea concerning the child's death.

He is not dead. o The armed forces cannot kill him or others like him present in the coloured townships such as Langa, Nyanga, Orlando, and Philippi, fighting against injustice.

Imagery

Visual Imagery: In the first two stanzas, the poet uses the image of a child who raises his fists to show his resistance towards apartheid.

Organic Imagery: Throughout this poem, the poet uses this imagery to infuse her anger in readers' minds. After reading the lines such as "where he lies with a bullet in his head" readers feel angry and at the same time sorry for the innocent child.

Tone

In the first three stanzas of the poem, the **tone is firm**, and it highlights the fact that even an innocent child understood the value of freedom and equality.

Hence, through the poet's voice, the spirit of the child screams out to his countrymen to end their suffering by standing together for the sake of saving other children like him.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The child who was shot dead...

Ingrid Jonker

1. **Comment on the reference to 'the child' in the title of the poem.** (2)

(It evokes a sympathetic response. A child is vulnerable and helpless against the armed soldiers. It shows the cruelty and senselessness of this death – this child did not live long enough to realise his potential.)

2. **The title refers to the 'dead' child, yet in line 1 'the child is not dead'. Discuss the contradiction/dichotomy by referring to the rest of the poem.** (3)

(The contradiction/dichotomy leaves the reader pondering: how can the child be both dead and "not dead"? The speaker introduces the idea that the child is a symbol of innocence/hope/resistance. None of the lives lost will be forgotten, as they are 'everywhere'. They will be remembered in history in the struggle for freedom. The child will always be present to drive the struggle and ultimately reap the rewards of freedom by travelling 'without a pass'.)

3. What does the altered repetition of “The child lifts his fists against his mother / father” reveal about the generation gap that is reflected in responding to the laws of apartheid? (2)

*(The child is unhappy with the parents’ submissive attitude – they did not fight hard enough. He (as a **synecdoche of the youth**) will now take up the fight, literally. The child seeks a quick and possibly violent solution to the end of Apartheid as he ‘lifts his fists’; whereas the protests of his parents would have been more peaceful as previous ‘generations who are shouting Afrika’ campaigned against Apartheid in this way. The youth is filled with rage at the Apartheid world they are forced to inhabit, the legacy of previous generations who ‘allowed’ matters to reach this intolerable point. Active and passive resistance)*

4. How does the diction in stanzas 1 and 2 highlight the difference between mothers and fathers? (3)

(The image of the mother refers to pain and suffering – they “scream” and their screams of anguish are heard far and wide. The image of the father refers to warriors and pride. It refers to “justice and blood” – the call to arms to regain their lost pride.)

5. Comment on the effect of the denials in the third stanza. (2)

(The frequent use of denials and negatives emphasises just how frequently these events occurred during those brutal years in the fight for freedom. The reader understands that there are innocent victims in all these places, and the denials – indicative of officialdom – come across as blatant lies.)

6. Critically comment how the imagery used in lines 20-23 contributes to the mood.(3)

(The child playing in the sun creates a carefree mood without the violence of ‘bullets’ and ‘rifles’ and ‘batons’. ‘Treks’ and ‘travels’ suggest freedom and no more restrictions and confinements of ‘pass’ laws. The image of a ‘giant’ show that the child is now grown and has embraced his potential. This contributes to a mood of hope, optimism and confidence.)

7. Discuss the effectiveness of the last, short line of the poem. (2)

(The concluding image is particularly poignant because it reflects a child who did not want any part of the violence he grew up in but instead wanted to follow innocent pursuits. He wanted the opportunity to become an independent adult with no restrictions on where he could go. The pass book implies restrictions and oppression.)

8. During the Parliamentary address, Nelson Mandela commented that “in the midst of despair, Jonker celebrated hope.” Does this poem celebrate hope? Discuss your answer briefly. (3)

(Jonker remained desperately hopeful of a better future. The last line implies a future without restrictions. The repetition of “Not dead” implies hope and optimism.)

9. “The child” is repeated ten times in the poem. How does this repetition add meaning to the poem? (2)

(The repetition emphasises the age and innocence of the child. The effect is to highlight the number of innocent people who were killed in the fight against Apartheid.)