

MOTHO KE MOTHO KA BATHO BABANG - JEREMY CRONIN

BACKGROUND NOTES OF POET

Jeremy Cronin was born in Cape Town, in South Africa, in 1949. He became active in the South African Communist Party, and was arrested and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for being active in the struggle against apartheid. After he was released, and South Africa became a democracy, he became a member of parliament.

SUMMARY

This poem captures the scene of one prisoner communicating discreetly with another. A warden is present though out of sight. One is in a cell, we can presume that it may be solitary confinement as this was usual for political prisoners as this restricted the amount of contact between them and the general prison population.

The other is a prisoner who is cleaning the prison, at the time of the interaction he is actually polishing a door handle.

The prisoner in the cell is able to see what is happening by putting a mirror through the window of his cell door and watching the other man.

They "talk" by using signs that are not noticed by the watching warden. The "conversation" is interrupted by the warden who asks what is going on.

Before leaving the working prisoner encourages the other to have "strength" in the situation he finds himself in.

The main point of the poem is that as an isolated prisoner he has no contact with others and is ignored and dehumanised, this can be very demoralising. The communication (human contact) provides the prisoner with a sense of comfort and encouragement.

The cleverness of the participants is shown as they find ways to maintain human contact, communicating with sign language in defiance of the deprivation of imprisonment.

This scene demonstrates *ubuntu* in action.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

A noticeable feature of this poem is its visual layout. The narrative is provided on the left, while a 'translation' is provided in brackets on the right.

The format of this translation or explanation is varied as the poem progresses. The first insertion in line 11 announces itself as an explanation, the second (line 14) and third (line 18) give the explanation directly, while the last insertions lose the brackets, as if the reader has now learned the poem's language and no longer needs them.

The poet uses italics for different purposes, as well as the use of dashes. The use of italics in lines 19 and 21 seems to indicate direct speech. It is most effective that 'Strength brother' (line 25) is also written this way, as the two prisoners are communicating so effectively they may as well be using direct speech.

The use of the present tense makes the content feel immediate, and in the last stages of the poem, as we are instructed to watch, we feel as though we are sharing the cell and watching the signals with the speaker.

THE TITLE

The title means that one's being and meaning in the world can only be fulfilled by the being of another – importance of other people.

We are all dependent on each other – interdependent. The prisoners depend on one another. Similarly, the resistance movement depends on the support of the people.

Lines 1-2

By holding my mirror out of the window I see / Clear to the end of the passage.

My mirror – emphasises possession. Prisoners had very few possessions. Therefore, the mirror is important to the prisoner. It served another important purpose: it was a means of communicating. This emphasises that interpersonal contact was not allowed and the only way to communicate is through “intermediary”. The mirror represents a connection with the outside world. It provides a means of escape from his isolation.

window – irony: A window usually provides a view of the outside. They could not see the outside world. This “*window*” was the gap between the bars of his cell. It allowed him to see the passage outside their cell. This emphasises their lack of freedom, isolation and the lack of human contact.

Clear – he can see the entire corridor and does not see any guards. They were now ‘free’ to ‘talk’.

Lines 3-4

There's a person down there. / A prisoner polishing a door handle.

He refers to the prisoner first as a person and then as a prisoner. Because the mirror is small, it took a few seconds to register that the person was a fellow prisoner.

He is different from the prisoner who was polishing the door handle. The less serious ‘offenders’ were allowed a little ‘freedom’ by performing menial chores. Menial chores are also symbolic of their subservience, but this is only an outward subservience.

The door handle represents the proximity to freedom. One door separates them from freedom. This emphasises that they are trapped in the prison because of unjust laws.

Lines 5-6

In the mirror I see him see / My face in the mirror

They do not see one another face to face. but through reflections in the mirror. He sees prisoner who is polishing the door. The prisoner sees the face of the narrator in the mirror.

Lines 7-12

I see the fingertips of his free hand / Bunch together, as if to make / An object the size of a badge / Which travels up to his forehead / The place of an imaginary cap. / (This means: A warder.)

He starts to communicate with the narrator using signs.

Communication does not need words: the prisoner is telling the narrator that he is being watched by the warden – they had no privacy.

This communication proves that the prisoners were not completely subservient. The prisoners shared a common bond and were loyal to their fellow prisoners.

free hand – He was using one hand to polish, the other was “free”. *Free hand* implies that a person can do anything. irony: they had no freedom.

badge and cap – symbols of authority

Lines 13-15

Two fingers are extended in a vee /And wiggle like two antennae. / (He's being watched.)

Simile – His fingers are compared to antennae. Antennae are used to communicate. The prisoners have developed a sign language. He explains that he is being watched.

Lines 16-19

A finger of his free hand makes a watch-hand's arc / On the wrist of his polishing arm without / Disrupting the slow-slow rhythm of his work. / (Later. Maybe, later we can speak.)

His hand gestures suggest that he will speak to the narrator later

slow-slow rhythm of his work – he works very slowly as he has been in prison for a while. This work is now a routine. There is no need to hurry. This gives him more time to communicate. Also, he is not doing this work willingly. Polishing and cleaning is not his work. That provides him with an opportunity to communicate with the other prisoners and to convey messages.

free hand – repetition (line 6) – just as the hand of a watch moves in a particular direction at a particular speed, so too are the movements of the prisoners controlled.

Lines 20-21

Hey! Wat maak jy daar? / -- a voice from around the corner

Afrikaans –the language of the oppressor. Apartheid was introduced by the Afrikaners. Authoritative tone conveys sense of control of the guard over the prisoner. Only those “in power” are given a voice.

Line 22

No. Just polishing baas.

This is the only spoken words of the prisoner. The use of title when addressing the warder, conveys a subservient, meek tone to dispel any suspicions of the guard.

Baas = boss – refers to a person who is in charge/control. The guards can only control their physical movement. They had no control over the minds of the prisoners.

Line 23-26

He turns back to me, now watch / His free hand, the talkative one, / Slips quietly behind / Strength brother, it says,

now watch – Not listen. This ties in with the context of the poem. Extending an invitation to the reader to be part of the conversation and subterfuge.

the talkative one – Personification of the hand – the hand is talking. The hand seen as an entity of its own. This is their only means of communication. This communication reassures the narrator that he was not alone.

Slips quietly behind - the movement of the hand is discreet. It is not noticed by the guard.

Repetition of *free hand* – this also emphasises their limited freedom and limited opportunity to communicate.

Strength brother, it says – He is encouraging the prisoner to be patient, not to lose hope. He conveys a message of perseverance. He reassures the narrator that he is not alone.

Brother – sense of unity – ubuntu: everyone is connected

Line 27-28

In my mirror, / A black fist

In my mirror – everybody cannot see what is happening.

Black fist – This is the universal sign of black power and opposition to oppression. It symbolizes freedom, defiance and pride. Even though they are oppressed, they will not be discouraged, they will keep fighting for freedom. This also relates to the theme that strength comes from supporting one another (ubuntu).

THEMES

- Even in the most hopeless situation, one can find faith through camaraderie.
- Loyalty
- The spirit of defiance cannot be broken.
- The cleverness of the prisoners who find ways to maintain communication with sign language
- Defiance of prison rules, the resilience of the human spirit
- The spirit of ubuntu – the victory of human connection across prison cell and colour line

tone

Determination, admiration, pride, conversational, undertone of rebellion, sardonic (mocks the principle of imprisonment -restriction of personal freedom)

MOOD

Hope for the future, defiance, thoughtful

QUESTIONS

1. How does the title reflect the message of the poem? (6)
2. Discuss how the poet creates a sense of alienation and isolation in the poem. Substantiate your answer with reference to diction and imagery. (3)
3. Is the use of colloquial language in this poem? Give a reason for your answer. (2)
4. How does the poet include the reader near the end of the poem? (2)
5. Discuss why this poem may be both humanist and subversive at the same time? (4)
6. Identify the tone of this poem? Give a reason for your response. (2)