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English Home Language/P2 6 DBE/November 2012 NSC

IN DETENTION – Chris van Wyk

He fell from the ninth floor
He hanged himself
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
He hanged himself
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
He fell from the ninth floor
He hanged himself while washing
He slipped from the ninth floor
He hung from the ninth floor
He slipped on the ninth floor while washing
He fell from a piece of soap while slipping
He hung from the ninth floor
He washed from the ninth floor while slipping
He hung from a piece of soap while washing

QUESTION

This poem satirises the official accounts of deaths in detention during the apartheid era. By close reference to the structure, diction and tone of the poem, discuss the above statement in an essay of 250 – 300 word (one page)

Answer

- This is a satirical poem written to show the patent absurdity of the reasons given by the police or government spokespersons for people's dying in detention.
- During the apartheid era, prisoners were held in detention.
- A number of people died because of beatings by the police.
- The reality of the situation is the horror and the brutality of the murders in detention.
- The speaker uses the same sentence structure,
 - * firstly, to create dark comedy by means of the increasingly entangled details;
 - * secondly, to echo the reports of the police in order to emphasize the number of deaths in detention and show how often the police lied about it.

- The structure of the poem parodies statements made by government officials in a newspaper and/or a news broadcast. It reads like an official document.
- The statements lack any depth or elaboration.
- Verbs such as 'fell', 'hanged' and 'slipped' suggest the lame quality of the official explanations offered by the authorities.
- There is no hint of sympathy.
- A tragic event is made to appear insignificant.
- The lack of full stops adds to the inconclusive nature of the statements, which lack sincerity; it helps with the flow of ideas; it is an activist's protest against the government.
- The ridiculous excuses were presented as facts.
- The speaker starts each sentence with the pronoun, 'He' in order to contribute to the sense of absurdity.
- He shows that police/authorities would portray the victim as the agent of his own death or the victim of a mere accident.
- This would dispel any suspicion that the security police and the prison authorities should be held liable for the prisoners' deaths.
- The tone of the poem is sarcastic/scornful/ironic. The speaker shows this by manipulating the language to suggest that earlier claims could be accurate, but were not, and the absurdity of the later points suggests this.

[Consider a neutral/indifferent tone, if well substantiated.]

- The details of the excuses/explanations are juxtaposed/organised in an increasingly ridiculous manner, highlighting the dishonesty of the official versions of events.