

Analysis taken from: *Oxford University Press*:

[https://www.oxford.co.za/.../5\\_13\\_Memo\\_for\\_task\\_sheet\\_for\\_Grades\\_10\\_12\\_on\\_City\\_Johannesburg.doc](https://www.oxford.co.za/.../5_13_Memo_for_task_sheet_for_Grades_10_12_on_City_Johannesburg.doc) viewed on 16

August 2017. Aims also contributed. Compiled by Jules

Title: City Johannesburg	The title tells us that the poem is about a specific place and setting, namely the city of Johannesburg. It is a demanding, harsh and alienating urban environment. Two examples of words or phrases that describe the setting.  "I can feel your roots, anchoring your might" (line 31) "Jo'burg City, you are dry like death...(line 39)
-----------------------------	---

Author: Mongane Wally Serote  <b>PLEASE FIND OTHER INFORMATION ON SEROTE AS THIS IS ALREADY PART OF MY ESSAY</b>	'Mongane Wally Serote was born in Sophiatown on 8 May 1944, just four years before the National Party came to power in South Africa' (Poetry International Web. 2009. <a href="http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/15594">http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/15594</a> ). He was a black man and 'The New Black Poetry, or Soweto Poetry found purpose in the opposition to apartheid' (Chapman: 494). Serote and 'others represented a powerful movement in the 1970's' (Chapman: 498).
--	---

Stanza/line	Poem line	Analysis
1/1	This way I salute you:	The speaker addresses Johannesburg directly. We know this because of the first words of the poem, "This way I salute you..." In line 1, the speaker describes a "salute". Who would you salute, and why? Usually one would salute someone in authority, such as an officer in the army or the police. It is meant to show respect for authority.

Stanza/line	Poem line	Analysis
	My hand pulses to my back trouser pocket	The speaker (“I”) in the poem is an African, and is most likely a man, because we are told in lines 2 and 3 that he searches frantically for his pass book in his back trouser pocket and his jacket. The speaker has a complex relationship with the city of Johannesburg. The word “salute” suggests respect for the city, but perhaps also fear.
	Or into my inner jacket pocket	The first stanza, he's stumbling looking for his pass, people of different races had to carry these. I'm assuming he's getting onto a bus to go to work. He almost has a worried tone when he says "pulses" as if to show that he's trembling, he needs this pass, it's his life. They (government) have made it his life
	For my pass, my life,	Time setting. The “pass” is the identity document all Africans had to carry with them under apartheid legislation. The pass showed whether someone had permission to work in the city. The mention of a pass tells us this poem is set in the apartheid era. These images show different aspects of the city. In the first we see the helplessness and humiliation of the speaker as he searches for the “pass” that allows him to work in the city, and which is therefore as important as his “life”.
5	Jo’burg City.	Throughout the poem we also see that the speaker directly addresses the city and the repetition of the words “Joburg city” emphasize how omnipresent the city is in the life of the speaker. We know that the historical setting is the apartheid era, and that is why the pass is described as his “life”: without it, the speaker would

Stanza/line	Poem line	Analysis
		not be allowed to work in the city, and could even be arrested.
	My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets	<p>My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets            For my thin, ever lean wallet... (lines 6–7)            The image in lines 6–7 is a simile            Lines 6–7 (simile): The hand searching for the pass is compared to the shape and movement of a snake            These images show different aspects of the city. In the first (lines 6–7)            we see the helplessness and humiliation of the speaker as he searches for the “pass” that allows him to work in the city, and which is therefore as important as his “life”.</p> <p>Simile--&gt;" My hand like a starved snake " suggests that he is nervous about getting his pass that he grips onto it as a starved snake would its prey . In the previous line the poet depicts a sense of nervousness and anxiousness experienced by the speaker as his "hand pulses" . This stems from the negative connotations surrounding the word "pass" as this document was used by the Apartheid government to place restrictions on and control ethnic minority groups.</p> <p>"My hand like a starved snake" I can picture a skinny malnourished hand, he's projecting that he lives in poverty, not enough food.</p>
	For my thin, ever lean wallet,	<p>In lines 6–10 there are images that suggest hunger. The speaker’s wallet is “lean” and his hand is like a “starved snake”; his stomach “groans a friendly smile to hunger”, indicating that hunger is familiar, like a friend, but also devours coppers and papers (money). With these images and words, the poet shows us that the speaker is</p>

Stanza/line	Poem line	Analysis
		poor and struggling to survive in the city.  "Thin ever lean wallet" no money
	While my stomach groans a friendly smile to hunger,	"While my stomach groans a friendly smile to hunger" he's starving, and he feels as if his stomach let's him down, teases him with hunger.
	Jo'burg City.	
10	My stomach also devours coppers and papers	"My stomach also devours coppers and papers" pretty stumped with this one. I could say that he's so hungry, do they expect him to eat the money? Or I don't know pretty clueless.
	Don't you know?	Rhetorical question
	Jo'burg City, I salute you;	The "salute" in the poem is different, in that it takes the form of a frantic search for the speaker's pass. This indicates the speaker's anxiety and fear when in Johannesburg.
	When I run out, or roar in a bus to you,	He leaves his love behind, while he goes to work for the day
	I leave behind me, my love,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Note that line 14 of the poem is ambiguous, because of the punctuation (comma). It is not clear here whether the</li> </ul>

Stanza/line	Poem line	Analysis
		<p>speaker is addressing the city as “my love”, or whether the speaker is adding “love” to the list of things he or she leaves behind in the township every morning.</p> <p>Line 14 is somewhat ambiguous. Is the poet calling the city itself “my love”? This would show that he is tied to the city not only by necessity and need, but also by a paradoxical love. This could be an example of irony in the poem.</p>
15	<p>My comic houses and people, my dongas and my ever whirling dust,</p>	<p>The speaker works in the city, but does not live there. Every morning and night he takes a bus to and from the city: he must return to “comic houses and people” (line 15). These words refer to the dormitory townships, defined by dongas and dust, where Africans were forced to live, on the outskirts of the white city</p> <p>"Comic houses" his home is a joke, they expecting him to live in such standards</p> <p>His ever whirling dust, creating an image of him constantly getting on a bus to leave it all behind while he has to go to work. The bus roaring (speeding) which leaves a dust trail</p>
	<p>My death</p>	<p>In contrast to his “life” (line 4, referring to the pass book which allows him to live in a township and work in Johannesburg – thus “live”), the township the speaker returns to at night is twice described as “my death” (lines 16 and 29).</p>
	<p>That’s so related to me as a</p>	

Stanza/line	Poem line	Analysis
	wink to the eye.	
	Jo'burg City	
	I travel on your black and white roboted roads	
20	Through your thick iron breath that you inhale	<p>Through your thick iron breath that you inhale  <b><u>At six in the morning and exhale from five noon. (lines 20–21)</u></b>  The image in lines 20–21 is personification</p> <p>Lines 20–21 (personification): The city breathes and exhales  The second image (lines 20–21) shows the vast power of the city and also suggests pollution and industry (“Thick iron breath”). I identify with how small and powerless the speaker feels.</p> <p><b>The second image shows the vast power of the city and also suggests pollution and industry (“Thick iron breath”). I identify with how small and powerless the speaker feels. See the attraction of the city as well as the pain it causes.</b></p> <p>Johannesburg is personified in the poem, but is also represented as a harsh, demanding and unhealthy environment: the city has a “thick iron breath” (a reference to industry and pollution), which “inhales” and “exhales” the African workers early in the morning and late at night.</p>

Stanza/line	Poem line	Analysis
		Personification--> " through your thick iron breathe you inhale ". Here Johannesburg is given the human quality of having breath . I believe the author is trying to show the vast power of the city and possibly make reference to pollution and industry. Johannesburg is referred to as "your".
	At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.	He travels and works for long hours. He must be exhausted. 6Am - 5pm
	Jo'burg City	
	That is the time that I come to you,  When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,	The city is defined by its artificiality, a place where nature has been banished, and hard urban realities are reflected in the urban environment. The speaker travels to and fro on the "black and white robotted roads", and sees "neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind", and "cement trees" (line 24–27: metaphors for street lights and lamp posts). The setting is thus experienced as inhuman and uncaring, from the point of view of the speaker.
25	That is the time when I leave you,	
	When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the	When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the falling darkness On your cement trees. (lines 26–27)

Stanza/line	Poem line	Analysis
	falling darkness	<p>The image in lines 26–27 is a metaphor            Lines 26–27 (metaphor): The lights of the city are compared to “neon flowers” and lamp posts are compared to “cement trees”</p> <p>The third image (lines 26–27) reveals the artificial beauty of the city in the dark: nature has been replaced by “neon flowers” and “cement trees”. These lines help me to empathize with the speaker’s plight. The imagery is striking and unusual, allowing me to see the attraction of the city as well as the pain it causes.</p> <p>The third example reveals the artificial beauty of the city in the dark: nature has been replaced by “neon flowers” and “cement trees”. These lines help me to empathize with the speaker’s plight. The imagery is striking and unusual, allowing me to s</p>
	On your cement trees.	<p>Metaphor --&gt;"on your cement trees" this expression is metaphor as he is referring the cities skyscrapers and buildings . He is using natural phenomena to describe a place that is lacking such natural elements . The poet makes use of an extended metaphor as he refers to "roots" anchoring . I believe he is expressing how deeply the city has effected his life .</p>

Stanza/line	Poem line	Analysis
	And as I go back, to my love,	Line 28 seems to suggest the latter probability,
	My dongas, my dust, my people, my death,	
30	Where death lurks in the dark like a blade in the flesh,	The township is a place of death possibly because it is so dangerous that death “lurks in the dark like a blade in the flesh” (line 30), but also because it is a dumping ground for African workers under apartheid, where they exist hand-to-mouth.
	I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness	The poem ends with the speakers abject acknowledgment that the city’s deep roots and “might” are anchored in his own feeble flesh, mind and blood. This once again emphasizes the power, might and authority of the apartheid city, as opposed to the powerlessness, helplessness and desperation of African workers: all that the city requires is their flesh, mind and blood (lies 31–33).
	In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,  And everything about you says it, That, that is all	

Stanza/line	Poem line	Analysis
	you need of me.	
	Jo'burg City, Johannesburg,	
35	Listen when I tell you,	
	There is no fun, nothing, in it.	
	When you leave the women and men with such frozen expressions,	
	Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil erosion,	<p>How does the speaker ("I") feel about this place? Find two examples to support your ideas.</p> <p>The speaker is apprehensive in Johannesburg, as we can see from the way he desperately searches for the pass that allows him to be in the city.</p> <p>He also sees the city as a place of desperation and sorrow, as we see in the words "Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil</p>

Stanza/line	Poem line	Analysis
		erosion..."(line 38).
	Jo'burg City, you are dry like death,	
40	Jo'burg City, Johannesburg, Jo'burg City.	

## GENERAL COMMENTS

The speaker is an African who travels to work in the city

The word "I" in the first line immediately suggests the presence of a first-person speaker.

"City Johannesburg" is about the relationship between the speaker, an African working in the city in the apartheid era, and the city, Johannesburg. He is at the mercy of the city, which is shown to be vast and powerful, a place of insecurity and sorrow for the speaker. The poem uses personification to show how the city exerts control over individuals and every aspect of their lives. Although the speaker works in the city, at night the speaker must travel back to the "comic houses" and dry

“dongas”. The city leaves workers with “frozen expressions” on their faces, which shows how inhospitable □ the city is towards its African workers.

- There is an overlap between the answers to different questions. This shows that the different aspects of a poem – such as setting, imagery, tone and form – are intricately connected and intertwined.

**Tone:** A speaker’s voice usually projects a certain tone. The voice may be angry, bitter, sarcastic, mocking, or joyous. Tone tells us how the speaker is feeling. Describe the tone of voice in “City Johannesburg”. What does it tell us about the speaker’s feelings and attitudes? What kind of mood or atmosphere is created by the tone of voice in the poem? Look carefully at the diction, imagery, rhythm and what is emphasised or repeated.

- The tone of a poem is usually suggested by the choice of diction and imagery, as well as the issues, feelings and situations the speaker describes. In Serote’s poem, the tone changes and develops in complex ways. At the beginning of the poem (lines 1–5) the tone is ironic, mocking as well as fearful and resigned: the idea of a respectful “salute” is *ironically inverted* as a desperate search for a pass. We are therefore immediately alerted to the fact that this poem – which masquerades as a “salute” to the power and glory of a large city – may in fact contain a powerful critique and protest.
- In lines 6-10 several words and images refer to hunger and starvation: “starved snake”; “thin, ever lean wallet”; “my stomach groans”; “hunger”; “devour”.
- The grouping of such words together reveals the speaker’s attitudes and feelings about the city as a cruel and heartless place that keeps him on the point of starvation and desperation. In the lines that follow, a profound feeling of sadness and exhaustion is evoked. Ironically, the speaker may be calling this cruel and harsh city “my love” (line 14): the city is like a pitiless and heartless lover. On the other hand, the speaker may simply be saying that “love” is one of the things he is forced to leave behind every morning. Note that “live” and “death” are ironically juxtaposed in lines 28–30.
- In the words “my comic houses and people, my dongas and my ever whirling dust, / my death”, the poet is drawing a sharp comparison between the huge concrete jungle of the city, and the neglected township. One could read anger and resentment

into the tone at this point. The poet speaks of “comic” houses: this is an evocative reference to the matchbox houses built for urban Africans during the apartheid era

- The poem ends on a note of resentment, disillusionment and sorrow. The township is a place of danger and death. (“Death” is juxtaposed with the word “life” early on in the poem, see line 4). The speaker can feel the city sapping his strength (line 31) and realises that the city wants nothing from him except his flesh, blood and mind (lines 30–33); in other words, his whole being, his life itself.

**Imagery:** Being able to identify an image is less important than being able to understand *why* a poet has chosen to use a particular image, and *how it works* to help the reader respond to and make meaning from the poem. Discuss how imagery in “City Johannesburg” contributes to your understanding of the setting, the speaker and the speaker’s circumstances. Identify and describe five images and explain how each works (IDE). Give reasons for your choices.

- There is a striking *simile* in line 6 of the poem: the speaker’s hand as it “pulses” frantically to his pockets for his pass, is compared to a starved snake. This simile works well, not only because it evokes the shape and movement of a snake as well as a hand, but also because of the word “starved”, which suggests the desperation of a hungry snake and thus the constant hunger and desperation of the speaker. The simile helps to convey the nature of the exploitative/unequal and callous/cold-hearted relationship between the individual African worker and the urban setting, which is the central theme of this protest poem.
- There are several images in lines 7–10, all of which emphasize the idea of starvation and a desperate hand-to-mouth existence. These images work together to suggest the speaker’s poverty, desperation and constant hunger. Note how the poem’s imagery avoids using the commonplace imagery associated with the “city of gold” or *Egoli*. In refusing this stock imagery, the poet is drawing attention to the city’s exploitative and invisible underbelly: the experiences and point of view of its poorest and most deprived workers.
- There is a subtle *metaphor* in the words “thin, ever lean wallet”: the wallet is not merely “empty”, it is thin, lean and hungry, like a starving person.

- There is an example of *personification* in words such as “my stomach groans a friendly smile to hunger” (note how sound and visual imagery is combined here).
- The stomach ironically and unexpectedly devours not food, but “coppers and papers” – thus the poet focuses on the expense and cost of food, rather than the food itself. This is a clever *metaphor*, since it suggests that the speaker remains hungry, while consuming endless coppers and paper money like a slot machine.
- In lines 17–18 the speaker claims that in his township, death is as closely related to him “as a wink to the eye”. In this striking *simile*, the relationship between the desperate and powerless individual and death is not only intimate, but also so sudden, deeply ingrained and commonplace that it goes unnoticed, like a wink or blink of an eye.
- There are several other striking examples of *metaphor* in the poem: the lights that light up the night-time city are described as “neon flowers” (line 24 and 26), which suggests their rich and vivid colours, while line 27 refers to “cement trees” (perhaps lamp posts)
- We are told that the neon flowers flicker: they “flaunt” or show off in the breeze of an “electrical wind”. Note how here natural and artificial elements are unexpectedly combined: in the city setting, the natural world has been replaced by concrete, tarmac, electric lights, street lamps, industry, and so on. The word “flaunt” introduces *personification*, as well: note how different forms of imagery often work together to stimulate our senses.
- In the closing lines of the poem the *personification* takes a different form as the figure of the seductress or temptress is replaced by the idea of the city as a mighty tree whose roots are anchored in the speaker’s flesh, mind and blood, sucking him dry and feeding off him (this is a *metaphor*).

**Personification:** “City Johannesburg” is particularly rich in personification. For example, from the very beginning we see that the city is addressed as “you”, which suggests that the city, like a person, is able to hear or interact with the speaker (“I”). Circle all the examples of personification you can find and explain what each tells us about the city. Why does the poet use personification when describing the city? What does this suggest about the relationship between speaker and setting in the poem?

[10 + 5]

- “This way I salute you”: the first line of the poem introduces the personification of Johannesburg: the city is directly addressed as “you”, and we are told that the speaker “salutes” the city. Usually the word “salute” suggests respect and an acknowledgment of the power and authority of a person in authority, such as an officer in the army or the police. In this instance, the speaker shows the same respect to “Jo’burg City” but we soon see that there is an element of irony in the nature of the salute. Note that the personification is extended throughout the poem: the words “salute” and “you” (the conceit of direct address) is repeated and used throughout. The speaker asks the city “don’t you know?” (line 11) or claims that every morning “I come to you” (line 23), as if this is a relationship between two individuals.
- A striking example of personification is found in the idea that the city breathes and exhales a “thick iron breath” (line 20). In this example, the city’s breathing brings a vital human characteristic to Johannesburg, while simultaneously evoking the idea of industrial pollution. This lack of true humanity is further conveyed in the idea that the city breathes and exhales African workers, twice a day: in the morning they are sucked into the city to work, by the mighty and irresistible inhalation of the “iron breath”; and every morning they are “exhaled” back to the townships.
- Some of the metaphors and similes in the poem further enhance the overall personification of the city (thus different forms of imagery often work together). For example, we are told that the city “flaunts” its “neon flowers”, which suggests a form of flirtation and display, which evokes the ideas of the city as a seductress who lures the speaker with her beauty and night-time glamour.
- Finally, in the last line of the poem the city “needs” something from the speaker (line 33). This develops but also transforms the image of the city as temptress and seductress. The city is revealed as a bloodsucker or parasite who wants one thing only from the speaker: his flesh, mind and blood – that is, his humanity and life. Note that, ironically, although the city is given human characteristics, personification is used precisely to expose the city as deeply inhuman, merciless and exploitative.

Taken from English Junction 24: viewed 19 August 2014:

<https://sites.google.com/site/englishjunction24/analysis/ananalysis-of-city-johannesburg-wally-serote>

City Johannesburg, Wally Serote

### Analysis of City Johannesburg

The title of the poem could be seen as the central Tenor, metaphorically specified by a number of underlying vehicle and/or metaphorical constructions, which all serve to illustrate the ambiguous relationship the lyrical subject has with the city Johannesburg. The title may also suggest a central Vehicle referring to the conditions black people were subjected to during the apartheid era. In other words, as a central Tenor in the poem the title refers to the city only, but as a Vehicle, the title alludes to a deeper meaning that characterizes the oppressive nature of apartheid. Regardless of the reading one would prefer, "City Johannesburg" is about Johannesburg during the apartheid era and the lyrical subject vividly describes how s/he experiences the city in this era of ethnic oppression.

Line 1 introduces the lyrical subject's purpose in the poem by stating "This way I salute you". This, then, is a poem that pays a form of tribute to Johannesburg (the personification of Johannesburg as "you") as if the city is remarkable in some way and is deserving of praise. However, the irony of this salutation is immediately overshadowed by lines 2 to 4 when the speaker states "My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket/Or into my inner jacket pocket/For my pass, my life,". We realise that the Tenor in this metaphorical construction "My hand" and the verbal focus "pulses" constitute a metaphorical construction because it is language that has been deliberately made different. However, the objects "my pass" and "my life" are related to the subject and main verb because the connective word "Or" and the linking word "For" in lines 3 and 4 respectively extend the construction past line 2. So, to understand the hidden metaphor included in these lines we can read line 4 as, "My hand pulses for my pass [and] my life". The objects "my pass, my life" are linked to the subject "My hand" by the verbal focus "pulses".

The reading that “City Johannesburg” is a central Vehicle in the text is plausible here as this city is responsible for creating a nervous condition within the lyrical subject.

Other metaphors are presented in the poem that further highlight black people’s physical and psychological conditions of being removed from their homes in the countryside and sent to work in the cities. Johannesburg is then an example of one of these cities where blacks were forced to work (in the mines for instance). Lines 20 to 27 are noteworthy because the lyrical subject describes his/her experience of traveling to and from work:

20 Through your thick iron breath that you inhale

21 At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.

22 Jo’burg City.

23 That is the time when I come to you,

24 When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,

25 That is the time when I leave you,

26 When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the falling darkness

27 On your cement trees.

The city is described as a cold, lifeless entity ironically personified and given “natural” attributes. For example, the adjectival and verbal foci in line

20:

20 Through your thick iron breath that you inhale  
 Nom. focus Adj. focus Nom. focus Verbal focus  
 (Implying Jo'burg City)  
 (Vehicle)

The underlying tenor vehicle relation in this construction could be read then as “Jo'burg City inhales an iron breath”. Furthermore, in the construction in line 24, “When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,” the metaphor is used to personify the cityscape using natural phenomena such as flowers and the wind. The irony here is that cities usually lack these forms of natural phenomena and it is as if the speaker wishes to foreground the man-made features of Johannesburg's urban landscape. To illustrate, the adjectival focus “neon” qualifies “flowers” and is also figurative because “neon” is usually associated with things like lights and not flowers. As “neon flowers” is the thing which is being possessed by the possessive pronoun “your” (Jo'burg City), we can also say that the adjectival phrase “neon flowers” qualifies the subject/Tenor “Jo'burg City”. The adjectival focus “electrical” qualifies “wind” and is also used figuratively. The word “electrical” is usually associated with man-made features that require electricity for functioning. In line 24, “wind” is used metaphorically because “wind” is a natural phenomenon. The effect of this personification of the city serves primarily to drive the global Tenor-Vehicle relationship and highlights the inescapable relationship the lyrical subject has with the city, irrespective of how cruel the city may be.

The global Tenor-Vehicle relationship is used to embed metaphorical constructions that illustrate an ironic relationship to a city which is without life and meaning for the speaker. Line 40 is exemplary and the lyrical subject exclaims:

40 Jo'burg City, you are dry like death,  
 (Nom. Focus Adj. Focus Nom. Focus)

This metaphorical construction equates “Jo'burg City” with death by means of the vehicle “dry”. Johannesburg, then, is a city which is empty of water (suggesting nourishment and/or life) and so lifeless; a place where the lyrical subject starves.

In conclusion, the metaphors in the poem combine with the global metaphorical construction to conjure up images of suffering, oppression, and as Johannesburg is known is known for its riches attributed to gold mining, the way it is described in this poem portrays the “febleness/In [the] flesh, in [the] mind, [and] in [the] blood.” (lines 31 – 32) experienced by migrant workers during apartheid. As a global T

So, because of our understanding and knowledge of the world, we know that this constitutes an extended metaphorical construction as it is illogical and impossible for one's hand to "pulse" for one's pass and/or life. In addition, the verbal focus "pulses" makes one think of a heartbeat – or more specifically an indication of life, as we are considered "alive" as long as we have a pulse rate. One's heart beats faster when one is nervous or threatened in some way and the lyrical subject beautifully expresses the nervous condition caused by and attributed to black people having to carry passes during the apartheid era. The reading that "City Johannesburg" is a central Vehicle in the text is plausible here as this city is responsible for creating a nervous condition within the lyrical subject.

Other metaphors are presented in the poem that further highlight black people's physical and psychological conditions of being removed from their homes in the countryside and sent to work in the cities. Johannesburg is then an example of one of these cities where blacks were forced to work (in the mines for instance). Lines 20 to 27 are noteworthy because the lyrical subject describes his/her experience of traveling to and from work:

20 Through your thick iron breath that you inhale

21 At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.

22 Jo'burg City.

23 That is the time when I come to you,

24 When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,

25 That is the time when I leave you,

26 When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the falling darkness

27 On your cement trees.

The city is described as a cold, lifeless entity ironically personified and given "natural" attributes. For example, the adjectival and verbal foci in line 20:

20 Through your thick iron breath that you inhale

Nom. focus Adj. focus Nom. focus Verbal focus  
 (Implying Jo'burg City)  
 (Vehicle)

The underlying tenor vehicle relation in this construction could be read then as “Jo'burg City inhales an iron breath”. Furthermore, in the construction in line 24, “When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,” the metaphor is used to personify the cityscape using natural phenomena such as flowers and the wind. The irony here is that cities usually lack these forms of natural phenomena and it is as if the speaker wishes to foreground the man-made features of Johannesburg's urban landscape. To illustrate, the adjectival focus “neon” qualifies “flowers” and is also figurative because “neon” is usually associated with things like lights and not flowers. As “neon flowers” is the thing which is being possessed by the possessive pronoun “your” (Jo'burg City), we can also say that the adjectival phrase “neon flowers” qualifies the subject/Tenor “Jo'burg City”. The adjectival focus “electrical” qualifies “wind” and is also used figuratively. The word “electrical” is usually associated with man-made features that require electricity for functioning. In line 24, “wind” is used metaphorically because “wind” is a natural phenomenon. The effect of this personification of the city serves primarily to drive the global Tenor-Vehicle relationship and highlights the inescapable relationship the lyrical subject has with the city, irrespective of how cruel the city may be.

The global Tenor-Vehicle relationship is used to embed metaphorical constructions that illustrate an ironic relationship to a city which is without life and meaning for the speaker. Line 40 is exemplary and the lyrical subject exclaims:

40 Jo'burg City, you are dry like death,  
 (Nom. Focus Adj. Focus Nom. Focus)

This metaphorical construction equates “Jo'burg City” with death by means of the vehicle “dry”. Johannesburg, then, is a city which is empty of water (suggesting nourishment and/or life) and so lifeless; a place where the lyrical subject starves.

In conclusion, the metaphors in the poem combine with the global metaphorical construction to conjure up images of suffering, oppression, and as Johannesburg is known is known for its riches attributed to gold mining, the way it is described in this poem portrays the “feebleness/In [the] flesh, in [the] mind, [and] in [the] blood.” (lines 31 – 32) experienced by migrant workers during apartheid. As a global Tenor “City Johannesburg” describes how this is a place where the lyrical subject has to live, yet despises. And as a global Vehicle, “City Johannesburg” offers us a glimpse of the irony of being alive was like during the apartheid era.


30

In city Johannesburg