

This week we will look at the following poems:

- *Johannesburg* by William Plomer. **Page 85.**
- *City Johannesburg* by Mongane Wally Serote. **Page 199**

I would like you to think about and comment on how each of these poems work as an example of postcolonial narratives.

I thought it would be beneficial to look at “Johannesburg” by William Plomer (page 85 and 86) and “City Johannesburg” by Mongane Wally Serote (page 199 – 200) at the same time to compare and contrast these poems.

Both poems are representations of South Africa’s urban development and the mining industry.

Both poems utilise the themes of pollution and urban decay.

In “Johannesburg” by William Plomer, a white poet who lived from 1903 – 1973, the imagery is of retired miners and their lives, “Greybeards who now look back/To the old days” (stanza 4).

The focus is on the male and male degradation within Johannesburg as seen in stanza 3:

Took opportunities to cheat,
Or meet the most expensive whore,
And conjure up with cards and dice,
New orgies from new veins of ore.

As a tutorial exercise, read the poem and look at the last two stanzas. Explain the tone used by the speaker. Use page 10 of your study guide for help.

In “City Johannesburg” by Mongane Wally Serote, we also get a glimpse of urban decay, but from a black man’s perspective. The speaker addresses Jo’burg City, and these words are repeated many times in the poem. This is to show how omnipresent the city is in the life of the speaker.

Johannesburg is personified in the poem. Not only is the speaker talking to the city and calls it “you”, but he also gives Johannesburg lifelike qualities such as breathing: “Through your thick iron breath that you inhale/At six in the morning and exhale from five noon” (lines 16 and 17).

The speaker is a black man who lives outside Johannesburg. He travels by bus to work in the Joburg daily. We learn this in lines 13 – 15:

When I run out, or roar in a bus to you,

I leave behind me, my love,

My comic houses and people, my dongas and my ever whirling dust.

It is also apartheid era because the speaker mentions his pass. A pass was needed during apartheid to show that a black person had permission to work in the city.

The city is demanding and harsh.

The poem also has examples of literary devices.

Can you find one example of a personification, one example of a simile and one example of a metaphor?

Have a look at these links for further information on the poem:

<http://rustumkozain.bookslive.co.za/blog/2010/02/17/big-words-city-johannesburg-by-mongane-serote/>

<https://mrwbotha.wordpress.com/2007/10/16/on-sarotes-city-johannesburg/>

Ms Behari,

The poem "Johannesburg" which is written by William Plomer, a South African and British author (1903-1973), describes the wealth as well as the lifestyle of a white/British man during and after the apartheid era. During the apartheid era, the white men were extremely wealthy as "fortunes were founded overnight". These men also lived extravagant lifestyles as they lived in "mansions" and were surrounded by "champagne baths", "expensive whores" and gambling games with "cards and dice". The wealth experienced here was a result of the fact that the white race was seen as being superior during the apartheid regime and therefore received more opportunities and thus more money than the black race. However, when the apartheid was abolished, the white men were left old with "greybeards" and with less opportunities in life while looking back at their pasts, trying to find wealth in the memories of their prior lifestyles.

The tone used by the speaker in the last two stanzas of the poem "Johannesburg" is one of nostalgia and sadness. The speaker is looking back at his past and longing for that wealth and that lifestyle which followed when the white man ruled South Africa.

"City Johannesburg" is written by Mongane Wally Serote, a black South African poet and writer who was involved in the Black Consciousness Movement. The poem, unlike that of "Johannesburg", is written from the perspective of a black man during the apartheid era. Evidence of this is identified when the speaker speaks of having to present his "pass" before being allowed access into the city of Johannesburg. Black individuals were equipped with these passes and were only allowed access to white-dominant areas if their pass stated that they worked there. Thus the speaker refers

to the pass as his "life" because without it he would not be able to go to work and therefore not be able to earn a living. More evidence of the apartheid era is also shown in the degraded state of the black man. It is seen that the man has very little money as he states his wallet is "thin" and "ever lean". The man is also hungry as his "stomach groans a friendly smile to hunger".

Therefore, based on the evidence above it can be concluded that both poems, "Johannesburg" and "City Johannesburg", are based during and after the apartheid era. Therefore both poems work as post-colonial narratives as apartheid (1948-1994) only occurred after South-Africa regained its independence from the British rule in 1934 thus making South Africa a post-colonial country.

In "City Johannesburg" literary devices such as personification, similes and metaphors are used to convey meaning. "My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets" (line 6) is an example of a simile. Here, the man's hand is being compared to a starved snake and his pass is being compared to the snake's food or prey. A starved snake will not slowly stalk its prey but, out of sheer desperation for food, will strike quickly at its prey just like the man's hand will, instinctively, strike his pocket for his pass.

An example of personification can be identified in line 8- "while my stomach groans a friendly smile to hunger". The man's stomach, an inanimate object, is given the human quality of being able to smile. This personification is effective as it implies that the man's stomach is no stranger to the feeling of hunger so it greets this feeling like someone would greet a friend they have known for a while. In other words, this man is used to being hungry.

In the poem, an example of a metaphor can be seen in line 25- "when your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind". This metaphor directly compares the lights and the robots of the city to neon flowers and compares the air providing life to these "flowers" to electrical wind. Thus the lights or the metaphorical flowers of the city are brought to life and sustained by a body of air which consists of electricity, their source of life. This metaphor is ironic as it associates the city of Johannesburg with natural features, such as flowers, but in reality it is known that cities normally lack these natural aesthetics.

In conclusion, the two poems discussed are similar in that they both utilise the themes of pollution and urban decay as well as represent South Africa's urban development and mining industry. However, the poems are different in that "Johannesburg" is written from the perspective of a white man and the privileges he experiences while "City Johannesburg" is written from a black man's perspective and the hardships he experiences. "Johannesburg" is also based both during and after apartheid while "City Johannesburg" is solely based during apartheid.

Kaitlin Allaway (61491535)

Wow! Kaitlin! I was not expecting such a well structured and well written answer. I am thoroughly impressed. Please keep it up. I actually don't think I have anything to

add to this. Please let me know if you have any questions or if there is anything I can help you with.

I have understood the poem "Johannesburg" so differently. I see the author looking at the same men throughout the poem - those who own or run the mines - who have found fortune and used it and abused their newfound wealth as they've pleased, and even when looking back on those times as older men who are more settled and responsible they have no regrets. The fifth stanza then tells the reader some of the ugliness with which the wealthy men exploited the miners, the sixth conveys how these pioneers are now respectable men and the seventh addresses them directly and asks them to look back and remember how things were for everyone, "sift the gold dust of your dreams" - look past your success - "from drifted sands of time" - to those who did not benefit from finding the gold and were left with only the 'sand' in their old age, nothing valuable. I understand the graybeards in the fourth stanza to be these same people described in the first three, who "find little in their past to blame and much to praise".