

MEMORANDUM: “City Johannesburg”

Aim: To explore poetic convention in the poem

(See book: p. 108)

Type: Group discussion and written work

Grade level: 10, 11, 12

Time: 40–60 minutes

File section: Poetry

Instruction: Read the poem “City Johannesburg”. Work in groups. Discuss and answer the questions below, then share ideas when you report back to the class. Look at the mark in brackets; these provide guidance for how detailed your answer should be. Write your ideas down.

City Johannesburg by Mongane Wally Serote

- 1 This way I salute you:
My hand pulses to my back trouser pocket
Or into my inner jacket pocket
For my pass, my life,
5 Jo’burg City.
My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets
For my thin, ever lean wallet,
While my stomach groans a friendly smile to hunger,
Jo’burg City.
10 My stomach also devours coppers and papers
Don’t you know?
Jo’burg City, I salute you;
When I run out, or roar in a bus to you,
I leave behind me, my love,
15 My comic houses and people, my dongas and my ever whirling dust,
My death
That’s so related to me as a 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
At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.
Jo’burg City
That is the time that I come to you,
When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,
25 That is the time when I leave you,
When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the falling darkness
On your cement trees.
And as I go back, to my love,
My dongas, my dust, my people, my death,
30 Where death lurks in the dark like a blade in the flesh,
I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness
In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,
And everything about you says it, That, that is all 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,
 Jo'burg City, you are dry like death,
 40 Jo'burg City, Johannesburg, Jo'burg City.

Questions

- 1 What important information does the title convey?
The title tells us that the poem is about a specific place and setting, namely the city of Johannesburg✓.
 [1]
- 2 What kind of place or setting is this?
It is a demanding, harsh and alienating urban✓ environment.
 [1]
- 3 Find 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)
 [2]
- 4.1 Who is speaking in the poem?
The speaker is an African who travels to work in the city✓. (1)
- 4.2 What single word immediately alerts us to the presence of a speaker in the poem?
The word “I”✓in the first line immediately suggests the presence of a first-person speaker. (1)
 [2]
- 5 Who or what is being addressed? How do you know?
The speaker addresses Johannesburg✓ directly. We know this because of the first words of the poem, “This way I salute you...”✓.
 [2]
- 6 In line 4, there is a clue to the setting in time. What does the word “pass” refer to here? And how does this help us identify the historical setting of the poem?
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✓. [2]
- 7.1 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. (2)
- 7.2 How is this salute different to a conventional salute?
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. (2)
 [4]

- 8 How does the speaker (“I”) feel about this place? Find two examples to support your ideas.

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.✓

**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 erosion...”✓ (line 38).
[2]**

- 9 In “City Johannesburg”, the poet uses vivid imagery to evoke the relationship between the speaker and the city.

Learners’ answers might differ. These are suggestions:

- 9.1 Underline three images that you particularly like.

My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets

For my thin, ever lean wallet... (lines 6–7) ✓

Through your thick iron breath that you inhale

At six in the morning and exhale from five noon. (lines 20–21) ✓

When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the falling darkness

On your cement trees. (lines 26–27) ✓ (3 × 1)

- 9.2 Identify each image you underlined (metaphors, similes, etc).

The image in lines 6–7 is a simile ✓.

The image in lines 20–21 is personification ✓.

The image in lines 26–27 is a metaphor ✓. (3 ×

1)

- 9.3 Describe the comparisons in each image.

Lines 6–7 (simile): The hand searching for the pass is compared to the shape and movement of a snake ✓.

Lines 20–21 (personification): The city breathes and exhales ✓.

Lines 26–27 (metaphor): The lights of the city are compared to “neon flowers” and lamp posts are compared to “cement trees”✓. (3 × 1)

- 9.4 Explain each image you underlined: what it means to you, what it makes you think about, and what is striking about it.

Learners’ explanations link to the images they chose in number 91.

Here is a suggestion:

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”. 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. 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.✓ (3 × 1)

[12]

- 10 Explain the images you underlined: what they mean to you, what they make you think about, and what is striking about them.

Learners' explanations link to the images they chose in number 9. Here is a suggestion:

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”. 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. 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 see the attraction of the city as well as the pain it causes.✓

[4]

- 11 Write a clear description of what the poem is about. Explain and justify your opinions.

“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.

[4]

[+ 3 Accuracy and clarity of writing]

Subtotal: 35

Consolidation (Grades 10–12)

Now that you have explored the poem in some detail, practise your analytical and writing skills. Write a paragraph response to ONE of the topics below. Remember, the accuracy and clarity of your writing will be assessed out of 5 additional marks.

Some advice for answering these questions:

- **Learners will probably need some guidance on how to respond to complex questions such as these. Suggest to them that they systematically work their way through the poem as follows:**
 - **Start at the top, and highlight any lines, words or phrases relevant to the question.**
 - **In a spider diagram, write down what you think the highlighted sections tell us. Add ideas you may have researched, for example information about passbooks, the treatment of African workers under apartheid, and so on.**
 - **Finally, shape these into a coherent paragraph (see the example below).**
- **Remember that each learner will produce a unique answer, but remind learners that any response should be based on textual evidence from the poem. This means they must specify**

poem lines or quote words or phrases, to substantiate their ideas.

- Note that line 14 of the poem is ambiguous, because of the punctuation (comma). It is not clear here whether the 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. Line 28 seems to suggest the latter probability, but allow learners to think this through for themselves.
- You will note that 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.
- The model answers below are more detailed and comprehensive than most learners are likely to produce, but nonetheless offer guidance on how to approach each question. There are obviously other ways of answering the question and more ideas to add: give learners credit for this.

1 **Speaker and voice:** Imagine the poem as an utterance – words spoken by a speaker whom you cannot see, but whose identity you need to establish through the words, imagery, tone and rhythms of speech. Who is the speaker in the poem, what is his or her relationship with the setting, and how do you know? [10 + 5]

- 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. 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.
- 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 not be allowed to work in the city, and could even be arrested. 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 poor and struggling to survive in the city.
- 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.
- 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.

- 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.
- 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). 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.
- The poem ends with the speaker’s 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 (lines 31–33).

2 **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. [10 + 5]

- 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.

3 **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. [10 + 5]

- 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*).

4 **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.

Subtotal: 15

Total marks: 50