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Angela Coleman ✓  
57420041  
SEMESTER 1  
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## Nightfall

I watch the darkness falling

And hills withdraw their shadows:

The sun, like ochre, reddens.

The swallows are at rest,

The sea-wind still and silent;

Above me fly the bats.

Now, as the streets are lit,

I fear the lurking thieves

Who seek their prey like hunters.

Here, there is no grass,

But dust from off the mine-dumps

Like smoke is drifting skyward.



Here there is no river

To shelter lurking frogs

And harbour water-fowl.

Here are only people

Jostling home from labour,

Herded by dusk, together.

(Malcolm, Friedman)

Chapman (2002: 109-110)

## Semester 1

### Assignment 01

**Unique number: 728899**

#### Question 1


**Carefully study B.W. Vilakazi's poem, 'Nightfall', and then comment on how the poet's imagery helps him to introduce the exploitation of black labourers.**

#### The exploitation of black labourers.

B. W. Vilakazi's poem "Nightfall" (Chapman, 2002:109-110) portrays a theme of black labour exploitation. This idea is supported by the poet's use of imagery. ✓

B.W. Vilakazi was born in 1906 and died in 1947 (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017). He was a South African Zulu poet, novelist and educator during the colonial era when the Natives Land Act (1913) was being enforced (South African History Online, 2011). His "western-influenced Zulu poetry" (Wikipedia, 2017) was influenced by the European romantic style, fused rhyme and stanza forms not known in Zulu with elements of the izibongo, traditional praise poetry (Wikipedia, 2017). The poem "Nightfall" was originally written in isiZulu and later translated into English in 1973 by Malcomb and Friedman. The original name of the poem was 'Ukuhlwa' and was published in 1945 in Vilakazi's second poetry publication "Amal'ezulu" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017). This was during the colonial rule of apartheid. The poem is free verse and consists of six stanzas of equal length. Each stanza is a tercet with three lines. The three lines in each stanza form a sentence. This essay will show how imagery effectively brings out the theme of black labour exploitation as the poet Vilakazi intends by discussing the implicit and explicit meaning of words and the connotative meanings used in the diction to describe his feelings. This essay will also discuss ✓

how the poet has used alliteration, personification, similes and synecdoche's to portray a theme of black labour exploitation. ✓


The way in which Vilakazi has used diction to portray an image is already apparent in the title of the poem "Nightfall". The word nightfall means the onset of night (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2018). As night approaches it becomes darker and darker and with darkness comes a feeling of oppression, vulnerability and fear. Perhaps, because a person cannot see in the dark, their perception of darkness is that darkness harbours danger, entrapment and threats. Furthermore, the reference to the "onset of ght" suggests that something unpleasant is happening or about to happen. ✓

In stanza one, the poet uses the pronouns "I" (line 1) and "me" (line 6) in stanza two which tells us that the poem is narrated in the first person. The poet is telling the reader a story and painting a picture of where he is when he says "here" (lines 10,13,16), that it is happening "now" (line 7) and that he is "watch[ing]" (line 1) what is happening around him. By using first person narration the poet creates an image of isolation and a sense of disconnection emotionally from other people. However, in stanza six the speaker tells us that "[there] are [...] people" (line 16) and they are "jostling" (line 17) and being "herded" (line 18) which implies that there are many people as the word people is in the plural form and "jostling" means many people moving together bumping and pushing one another (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2018). In addition to this Vilakazi often makes reference to things that move in groups such as the swallows, the bats and a herd which suggests overcrowding and the exploitation of groups of people. People being compared to a herd of animals in line eighteen is derogatory and implies that the people are of no importance.

Furthermore, in stanza one "the darkness falling" (line 1) and "the sun reddening" (line 3) paints a visual picture of the sun setting and the sky growing darker at dusk. Comparing the sun to ochre in a simile suggests that the speaker is at a mine as ochre is a residue by-product of iron-ore (Dictionary.com, 2018). 'The darkness falling' (line 1) creates an image that the darkness has no control over its ✓

fall just like the speaker has no control over what is happening to him. ✓

Personifying the darkness by making it appear to be a person creates a sense of evil in the poem. “The hills withdraw[ing]” (line 2) refers to a fight or war where one side withdraws. This is almost in a resigned fashion. The speaker is portraying a picture of the labourers in a depressed or fearful situation, withdrawing and resigning themselves to the evil and oppressive “darkness falling” on them. By saying that the “sun [...] reddens” (line 1), the speaker is implying that the sun is embarrassed by what is happening and paints a picture of workers being forced to work hard, to the point of sweat, blood and tears implying they are being exploited. ✓ ✓

In the second stanza the speaker continues to paint an image of the environment around him as he continues speaking to the reader. Painting a picture of the “darkness” (line 1) around him, the “swallows” (line 4) settling and roosting on cable lines “rest[ing]” (line 4) and “bats” (line 6) flying around in the dark sky above him. The image of the darkness with birds roosting very still and bats silently and aimlessly flying around the sky arouses an eerie sense of evil and confusion around the speaker. Swallows are birds that move in flocks and they can transverse borders, crossing into different countries. Birds are viewed as being free. However, these birds are not flying they are resting because it is dark implying that only the free have the privilege of rest. The alliteration of the ‘s’ sound in “sea-wind still [...] silent” (line 5) creates a hushed atmosphere. This hushed atmosphere emphasises the eeriness. It also implies that there is no more noise from the machinery in the mines, the work day is finished and it’s a time for rest but the use of the word “sea-wind” (line 5) which is harsh rather than the word sea-breeze suggests that it is the quiet before the storm. The poem suddenly becomes very personal and draws the attention to the speaker when he refers to himself by saying “me” (line 6). The reader is suddenly plunged into the night by the mention of “bats” (line 6) which are related to a sense of evil and have a very negative and fearful connotation. The imagery of bats flying above the speaker is frightening. ✓ 

In stanza three the speaker uses the adverb “[n]ow” (line 7) to start the sentence. This emphasises that what he is about to tell us is happening at the present time which we know is night time from the “darkness” (line 1). A positive image is portrayed as he tells us “the streets are lit” (line 7). However, street lights are artificial lights creating a false sense of safety. The street lights coming on draws the readers attention to the fact that the speaker is not safely at home but still out in the streets. It is a factual statement and almost lulls the reader. In contrast to the image of lights shining on the streets and feeling safe the speaker paints a picture of someone hiding when he tells the reader that he “fears the lurking thieves” (line 8) and compares the “thieves” (line 8) to “hunters” (line 9) “seek[ing] their prey” (line 9). This comparison of thieves to hunters gives the imagery of someone hiding and that the thieves are not after the material possessions but rather after the people. This is reflected in line nine as it makes reference to nature linking the word “lurking” (line 8) with “seek” (line 9). This creates an image of prey having little chance against a hunter. Hunters who supposedly have superior intelligence and the means to catch their prey. This imagery suggests that the labourers are fearful of their employers even after work hours are finished. There is no freedom to rest, they want them to work long hours, and the speaker implies that the employers think of themselves as “hunters” (line 9) who supposedly have superior intelligence. This image provides further evidence that Vilakazi is portraying the exploitation of workers.

The speaker uses the adverb “[h]ere” to introduce stanza four. This adverb reiterates that the speaker is describing the environment where he is, around him. It creates a sense of sadness and resignation. The reference to nature “there is no grass” (line10) implies that the speaker has a longing for home, for safety and for freedom. He paints a picture of fields of grass but this is not nature here as the word grass is offset by the word “no” (line10). The speaker paints a picture of the barrenness of the area and of coal dust. For the first time the speaker reveals where he is by describing the “mine-dumps” (line 11). He compares this “dust” (line11) to “smoke” (line12) in a simile which indicates fire and suggests danger. The image is of an environment that is polluted. This suggests that the workers

are working in an unhealthy environment and the reference to danger implies that the employers are not worried about the labourer's health suggesting again the exploitation of labourers during that era. They are only concerned about their profits. There is no clean air to breathe as the image of the thick "smoke" (line12) chokes a person just as a person cannot live freely as they are exploited and forced to be at the mines. The word drifting is almost peaceful and lulls the reader in preparation for the next statement.

The speaker states to the reader, at the beginning of stanza five, with the repetition of the word "[h]ere" (line 13) to emphasise that he is still at the mines. This reiterates the tone of longing for home and the feeling of resignation, loneliness, and isolation, that he cannot change where he is or his conditions. It also reinforces the polluted environment when the speaker says, "there is no river" (line 13). He is suggesting that there is no purity, cleanliness, or life here where he is at the mines. Water in a "river" (line 13) paints an image of purity, cleanliness and life flowing freely but this is offset negatively by saying there is "no river" (line 13). The reference to the river creates a picture of water flowing but when it is offset with the word "no" the image changes to a dry, dirty barren area. This image is reinforced with the synonyms "shelter" (line14) and "harbour" (line 15) because both mean cover or protection to hide behind or under. Referring to nature again, this implies there is nowhere for the "frogs" (line 14) or "waterfowl" (line 15) to live or hide for protection just as there is nowhere for anything or anyone to find protection. By referring to nature again and offsetting it with the word "no" (line 13) the speaker reinforces the image of no life or freedom in this environment. The poet has used "lurking" (line14) in an opposite way to "the lurking thieves" (line 8) in the previous stanza. It links it again to the "lurking thieves" (line 8) but where the "frogs" (line 14) themselves are seeking protection unlike the darkness that hid the "thieves" (line 8) before. He has put the antonyms "shelter" (line 14) and "lurking" (line14) beside each other suggesting the opposite meaning in the use of lurking. The speaker makes reference to a bird again in line fifteen when he speaks of a "water-fowl" which is a symbol of freedom. By saying that there is no safe-haven for the bird he is suggesting that



there is nowhere for them to hide on the mine. “[H]arbour” (line 15) has a double meaning and may also indicate that the “water-fowl” (line 15) have an ally to protect them where as the labourers do not. The area is devoid of protection in the form of grass and water. ✓

Stanza six begins with a very hard line and separates man from nature. The speaker reiterates where he is with the repetition of saying “[h]ere” (line 16) for a third time. He is still at the mine. For, the first time we have a picture of other people, many people. People “jostling” (line 16) implies and paints a picture of crowded people moving and pushing in a limited space and a lack of unity but with a common goal to move towards home. Again, there is a reference to “dusk” (line 18) and the darkness being personified as the controller. Men are reduced to nothing more than a group of animals controlled by a single force. It shows that despite having numbers they are held together by the common fear of the herder. This image creates a picture of people being submissive to a single employer who rules with fear. This is a very negative end to the poem as it shows that even together the labourers are still very controlled. This last stanza portrays an image of exploitation of workers. ✓

The poem speaks of the isolation that one person is feeling and the despair that he will never escape his situation as even as a group they are controlled. This is portrayed by the speaker referring to himself as a singular person “I” (line 1) in stanza one and “me” (line 6) in stanza two. In the last stanza he portrays the image of the labourers being “herded” (line 18) and being controlled without being able to escape their situation of being exploited. ✓

In addition to this the poet uses synecdoche’s. He makes references to those things that move in groups such as “swallows” (line 4) , “bats” (line 6) and “herd[s]” (line 18) to imply that masses of people were exploited as labourers and they resigned themselves to this way of life just moving together and doing what they are told. ✓

Furthermore, the reference to nature in every stanza one to five: the “sun” (line 3) in stanza one; the “swallows” (line 4), “bats” (line 6) and “sea” (line 5) in stanza ✓

two; the “prey” (line 9) in stanza three; the “grass” (line 10) in stanza four; the “river” (line 13), “frogs” (line 14) and “water-fowl” (line 15) in stanza five; and the word “herded” (line 18) which refers to animals in stanza six, which are indicative of harmony is offset by the lack of harmony in that which man has created, industrialisation, urbanisation and pollution such as the “dust from off the mine-dumps” (line 11). Harmony should indicate unity but in this poem it does not just as there is no unity between the people, the employers, and the labourers.

There are a lot of comparisons between nature and the mine. However, the references are not peaceful and create a sense of unease and conflict. The “sun” (line 3) which is warm, and light should be a positive phrase but portrays a negative image of conflict when it is compared to “ochre” (line 3) which is an iron-ore residue and has the colour pigmentation of war paint. Again, in stanza three the “street [lights]” (line 7) are a source of light and should provide safety but just as the lights are artificial light so is the sense of safety a false sense of security. The picture of “thieves” (line 8) hiding to harm the people like “hunters” (line 9) portrays an image of urbanisation and industrialisation which brings fear and harm. In the last stanza when the poet compares labourers to cattle being “herded” (line 18) as it is getting dark creates a sense of derogatory disrespect for the labourers and an oppressive evilness.

Therefore, the poet has used the contrast of light and dark to portray the exploitation of the labourers. Making the darkness appear to be a person creates a sense of evil in the poem.

Furthermore, he has used the comparison of nature and urbanisation to paint a picture of the mines. The birds, the grass and the river from nature represent the freedom of home and the iron-ore residue, the street lights, the dust, and the smoke from urbanisation to paint a picture of the mines and its polluted environment.

Vilakazi has effectively used imagery to bring out the theme of labour exploitation in the poem by using the implicit and explicit meaning of words and the connotative meanings in the diction to describe his feelings. This




interpretation of the poem has shown how the poet also used alliteration, personification, similes, and synecdoche's to portray a theme of labour exploitation. However, I did not find any reference to 'black' labourers only to labourers. The only reference to 'black' people would be the time period the poem was written in as it was a time that was heavily influenced by colonialism when the indigenous people and their land were exploited.

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## Declaration

ENG2603/101/3/2018

**DECLARATION REGARDING PLAGIARISM**

NAME: Angela Coleman

STUDENT NUMBER: 57420041

ASSIGNMENT TOPIC: ENG 2603

ASSIGNMENT NUMBER: Assignment 01 Semester 1

UNIQUE ASSIGNMENT NUMBER: 728899

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Signature: Angela Coleman

Date: 3 April 2018

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