

## 'For Don M. – Banned' by Wally Mongane Serote

Read the poem on page 241 of *Seasons Come to Pass* several times and then answer the following questions. You should read the contextual information on page 242 of the anthology for more information about both the title and the poem itself. You should also reflect on the four additional questions that appear on page 242 of the anthology.

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1. *it is a dry white season*
  2. *dark leaves don't last, their brief lives dry out*
  3. *and with a broken heart they dive down gently headed for the earth,*
  4. *not even bleeding.*
  5. *it is a dry white season brother,*
  6. *only the trees know the pain as they still stand erect*
  7. *dry like steel, their branches dry like wire*
  8. *indeed is it a dry white season*
  9. *but seasons come to pass.*
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1. In no more than three sentences, provide a summary of the poem. You might want to begin by using the following expression: In 'For Don. M – Banned' by Mongane Serote, the speaker ...

In 'For Don M.-Banned' by Mongane Serote the speaker appears to be describing a winter day but this short poem sends a message of comfort and hope to Don Mattera, who has been banned. To be banned meant being isolated from others and the speaker gives support to this member of the 'brotherhood' and reminds him that regardless of the solitary situation he is experiencing, he is not alone and that this season will pass and the situation is going to change.

2. What does the speaker mean when he/she refers to 'a dry white season'? You should be able to identify two different concepts or images that are being suggested. While the one is obvious from the words of the poem, the other comes into view when we consider *why* and *when* the poem was written.

When the speaker refers to 'a dry white season' the obvious image leads the reader to imagine a cold day in winter where there is no sign of life, no colour to brighten the environment. The word 'dry' would mean there is no water and without water there is no life. However, when the reader considers that this poem was written during the time of apartheid when Mattera had been banned a much deeper image presents itself to the reader. The 'dry white season' is no doubt referring to the time of apartheid when the country was ruled by white people. The word 'dry' is a reference to the bleak hopeless situation of those who suffered during this political 'season'.

3. What is the significance of the imagery of leaves and trees? Read the poem again several times and you will find a line that resonates with the cyclical nature of this image. Quote this line in your answer.

The significance of the imagery of leaves and trees is that trees are mighty and strong and their roots reach down deep into the soil to provide stability from wind and storms. They also sustain and

provide sustenance for the leaves which grow on the outspread branches of the trees. The 'dark leaves' are metaphoric and refer to people with dark skin whose lives are considered worthless as dry leaves would be in nature. This interpretation can be supported by the poet's use of the lower case letters used throughout this poem, – that those being discussed are not worthy of recognition. The trees that provide the strength and life source of leaves in nature are metaphorically those who stand behind the convicted and banned. It could be said that the trees which 'know the pain' (line 6) refer to the families/parents of those who silently support or they could be the leaders of the opposition to apartheid who 'still stand erect' (line 6). Either way, they would provide support to those who could be associated with the 'dark leaves'. Similes make comparison between two words by using the word 'like' and two examples of this are 'dry like steel' and 'dry like wire' where both the steel and the wire are being compared to 'dry'. Steel is a hard cold metal that is not easily broken and wire too is a lifeless material. These two objects could be indicative of imprisonment where steel bars and wire are used to restrain and contain persons. Those who are imprisoned for the same cause as Mattera would 'know the pain' (line 6). The line that resonates with the cyclical nature of this image is the final line, 'but seasons come to pass,' where the speaker gives hope. As nature prepares for the new life of spring where the trees will bear new leaves, so should the addressed have hope for a new season – a change of the political situation.

#### 4. Identify and discuss the figure of speech in line 3.

The figure of speech used in line 3 is 'with a broken heart they dive down' which is an example of personification. Personification applies human attributes to lifeless objects. Leaves do not have hearts and so cannot be broken. It is used here to strengthen the metaphoric link to people who are suffering and have broken hearts as they are broken down 'headed for the earth' (line3); to death, 'not even bleeding.' (Line 4)

#### 5. Given what you know about the historical context of the poem and its title, discuss the significance of line 5.

Line 5 'it is a dry white season brother,' is significant when considering the historical context of the poem. According to the supporting notes in Seasons come to Pass, the poem was written for Dan Mattera, a friend and fellow poet who had been banned during the 1970s. Being banned meant that the addressee was permitted no contact with colleagues or activists, exiled to a remote location with restrictions on movement, speeches and publications. In effect, this could be considered a form of imprisonment and one can only imagine the frustration of someone in this situation. The speaker offers hope to a 'brother' with line 5 meaning he aligns himself with the struggles of Mattera in this time when all seems hopeless, 'a dry white season'. He provides encouragement and the reader can almost envision the arm of the speaker around the shoulders of the addressee, as one could imagine a brother would do.

#### 6. Identify the instances of repetition in the poem and then explain the significance of the final line. What is being suggested by this line? How does this line change the tone of the poem? Remember that tone is usually described using adjectives that denote feelings, such as angry, hopeful, proud, exciting, disappointed etc. (See page 47 of your *Introduction to Literary Studies* for a discussion of tone.)

The words 'it is a dry white season' are repeated in line1, 5 and 8 and this diction is used to emphasize the point that it is a difficult time for those that are not white, as it is a season for whites. The first time this line is used it introduces the reader to a bleak picture. The second time it is used in

line 5 it offers solidarity and comfort, not only to Mattera but to all those that would consider themselves 'a brother', in effect all those whose lives are affected by 'the season'. In line 8 the situation is re-enforced with the use of the word 'indeed' which precedes the phrase and then continues into the final line. The final line begins with the word 'but' which determines a change in the tone and then the assurance that these times will change is given. The phrase 'seasons come to pass' suggests hope where there was none. In the first section of the poem where words such as 'dry' 'dark', 'broken' 'bleeding' and 'pain', denote hopeless feelings the tone changes and as nature provides hope with a new season, so too does the speaker assure all 'brothers' that this time will pass.