

## 'Men in Chains' by Mbyiseni Oswald Mtshali

Read the poem on page 229 of *Seasons Come to Pass* several times and then answer the following questions. You should also reflect on the four additional questions that appear on page 230 of the anthology.

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1. *The train stopped*
  2. *at a country station.*
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3. *Through sleep curtained eyes*
  4. *I peered through the frosty window,*
  5. *and saw six men:*
  6. *men shorn*
  7. *of all human honour*
  8. *like sheep after shearing,*
  9. *bleating at the blistering wind,*
  10. *'Go away! Cold wind! Go away!*
  11. *Can't you see we are naked?'*
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12. *They hobbled into the train*
  13. *on bare feet,*
  14. *wrists handcuffed,*
  15. *ankles manacled*
  16. *with steel rings like cattle at the abattoirs*
  17. *shying away from the trapdoor.*
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18. *One man with a head*
  19. *shaven clean as a potato*
  20. *whispered to the rising sun,*
  21. *a red eye wiped by a tattered*
  22. *handkerchief of clouds,*
  23. *'Oh! Dear Sun!*
  24. *Won't you warm my heart*
  25. *with hope?'*
  26. *The train went on its way to nowhere.*
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1. What is the poem about? You should be able to describe this in simple terms (that is, what happens) and you should be able to explain if there are any broader themes that the poet might be exploring or social commentaries that he may be advancing.

The speaker is observing six men (line 5) that are prisoners through his sleepy eyes. They are being transported and they were not treated as humans. He is trying to show sympathy for these men who have lost their freedom (naked and exposed) and to the harsh weather. Comparing them to cattle that has no freedom of choice. The prisoners will be transported to “nowhere”. This may implement that these prisoners may not have a future.

2. Identify the punctuation in line 5 and explain its purpose.

The use of the colon is to summarize their implication that these men have. Describing the six prisoners through the “frosty windows” and through the speaker’s “sleepy curtained eyes”. (what they looked like to the poet)

3. A simile is used in lines 6-9 to describe the men. Write a paragraph in which you explain which two things are being compared. Your paragraph should focus on specific words and phrases in the poem, and you should explain the effect of the simile and how it contributes to the broader point being made in the poem.

“men shorn of all human honour like sheep after shearing, bleating at the blistering wind”

The prisoners/six men are deprived from their own humane dignity and respect. They are seen as animals (sheep) that has been shaven clean. Contributing to the one prisoner asking that if the “wind” can’t see their “naked”. Literal - The prisoners may be naked or have little clothing on. Figuratively – They are shear to someone of power. (apartheid regime) “Bleating at the blistering wind” – They are crying/pealing against the “blistering wind” that may be the apartheid regime that abused (“blistering”) the people for no logical reason. Giving a sad and “cold wintery” tone to the poem to feel sympathy to the men/prisoners in their environment. The “-ing” alliteration can suggest the continues abuse that these men endure everyday by people who have power over them.

4. What is significant about lines 10-11? You should take note of the quotation marks at the beginning of line 10 and the end of line 11: What does this punctuation convey? What is the effect of these two lines and how do they contribute to our understanding of the men? How do they support the main idea being advanced in the poem?

One of the six men/prisoners are pleading out the apartheid regime to stop the abuse and their misuse of their power. The poet is quoting what the prisoner/man is saying and asking. The “cold wind” is personified to the apartheid regime. Asking if the regime can’t see that they have been stripped away from their rights already. May give a personal insight of the men/prisoners who are showing their emotion and resistance. They maybe be heading towards death. The men/prisoners are resisting against or pleading against the possibility of death.

5. Identify and explain the figure of speech in line 16. You should be able to name the particular literary device and then explain what two things are being compared. What does this figure of speech tell us about the speaker's fears for what might happen to these men? How does this comparison advance the main idea in poem?

“with steel rings like cattle at the abattoirs”

The poet used a simile in line 16. The men that were chained that got on to the train are compared to cattle that are being moved into a slaughter house to be slaughtered. The poet's concerns are focused on the men that maybe traveling towards death. The men/prisoners are compared to animals that have no freedom, they are in their own “camps” and they are going to be killed/murdered. Showing their life has no meaning in the perspective of the apartheid regime.

6. Identify two instances in the poem where the natural environment is described in order to imagine the feelings of the men in chains. You should be able to discuss each instance separately and then link them to the main ideas in the poem.

Line 9 – “bleating at the blistering wind”

The men/prisoners are crying/pealing against the “blistering wind” that may be the apartheid regime that abused (“blistering”) the people for no logical reason. This contributes to the theme of abuse. Where people were abused for no logical reason.

Line 20 – “whispered to the rising sun”

The men/prisoners are whispering in the morning “rising sun”. Traveling towards the end to their journey. They want hope and love in their hearts as their end is not promising. This contribute to the theme of death.

7. While the speaker appears to be describing a particular event, there is very little specific information about the spatial and temporal contexts, the identity of the speaker, or the men. What is the effect of this? Remember that this poem formed part of a growing body of anti-apartheid poetry. How does the lack of specificity support the point that the poet is trying to make?

The speaker creates the feeling of being restrained by current realities at that time, which obscure one's vision, creating a struggle to see the future. Thus, the speaker sees life as a train journey, and as the train continues so does the struggle continues to be free from restrain.

The poet makes use of a mixture of short and long meters, to highlight the importance of the struggle of being restrained. Also, the couplet is used to indicate that the struggle is not just about one person but of all those affected by the abuse, and restraint of the current regime.

The ‘I’ in line 4 indicates that the voice of the speaker is that of the poet narrating his story to the (listener) reader of what he observed whilst the train stopped at ‘a country station’. By using very explicit imagery, the speaker takes me through the outer journey of reality and inner journey of the soul. The poem portrays an image of a real event taking place, at that moment in time. Also, how people try to cope with their reality. The speaker doesn't reveal the exact location, as to where the train stopped, so here he is generalizing for it could be anywhere in a country more so South Africa, as the name of the poet is South African.