

ENG2602 – POETRY ANALYSIS

Closely study Mafika Gwala's poem, "The Shebeen Queen" (1989), below. In a **carefully worded essay** of approximately **1 200 words**, analyse how he uses **poetic devices (schemes and tropes)**, **syntax, diction and other language techniques** to **make a point about male factory workers** in this poem.

The Shebeen Queen

Mafika Pascal Gwala

- She stood at the factory gate
as she watched
her last debtor approach,
vooping his oversized overalls.
5 Her last Friday's collection
At this firm. Fifteen of them all
'Come boetie shine up.'
The man pulled out the bank notes
- With a quivering smile.
10 'Gosh, more than half his wages;
I didn't force it
 on him.'
She zipped her fat purse and
they walked across the crowded street
15 into a butchery.
When they whisked out
he had, tucked under his arm,
a plastic bag: fowl heads and feet.
And she – exposed out
20 of her tight shopper: a broiler.

Gwala, Mafika. 1989. "The Shebeen Queen", in Murray, S. (ed). Signposts. Durban: Mandla Publishers.

Read the unit on poetry in the study guide. Understanding how to analyse the poem depends on you understanding the content of that chapter.

Read and understand the question. The body of your essay will be a response to this question. Remember that you are writing an argumentative essay.

Now read the poem a few times. Read it out aloud. Once you start to develop an understanding of the poem, start your analysis.

Work methodically and analyse line by line, noting down the devices and techniques that you can identify.

What point do you think the poet is making about male factory workers?

Also, please read the 'assignment guidance' section in tutorial 101, directly after the poem.

Some things to consider about this poem-

- Consider the title of the poem. Can this be classified as juxtaposition? Compare the meanings of the words Shebeen and Queen. What effect does this title create? How does it relate to the question?
- Look at the structure of the poem. Is there a rhyme scheme? What is the purpose and effect of this?
- Language- consider words like shebeen, boetie, vooping. How does the use of colloquial terms help to bring across the point?
- Imagery- what kind of visual representation can you identify in the poem? What does it tell you about the shebeen queen and about the factory workers?
- Try to think outside the box e.g. 'oversized overalls' could be an indication of the factory worker being underweight since he can only afford chicken heads and feet.

Background & Contextual Information

When Miriam Makeba debuted in the musical King Kong, she immortalised the shebeen queen: these were the tough-talking, no-nonsense women of the townships who put their traditional brewing skills to use to keep their families from dire poverty during the oppressive apartheid years.

In South Africa, as across the world, brewing was historically women's work, falling under the ambit of household or ceremonial duties. A far cry from today's commercial and even craft beer brewing, traditional home brewing was unpaid, as with much of what is designated women's work. But as apartheid legislation eroded the quality of life of black South Africans, women used their traditional skills to keep liquor flowing, defying the prohibition on black South Africans drinking and brewing alcohol. Their illegal – and hence dangerous – activities provided a regular source of income for their fragmented families.

Shebeen queens were shrewd businesswomen. Realising that police would confiscate their slow brews when they raided, they developed shorter brewing times, adapting traditional methods to create stronger, quicker brews to serve to patrons after work on Fridays. Sometimes, to give the brews more of a kick, they shored up the liquor with dangerous additives such as methylated spirits, a denatured alcohol.

Shebeen culture

Despite the dangers, shebeens became central to cultural life for black South Africans. They were communal talking, laughing, drinking spaces where ideas as heady as the liquor flowed. Activists gathered to debate heatedly, while lovers and friends chatted; and the music played on. The now unmistakable rhythms of township life – phatha patha, kwaito, kwela and township jazz, the love children of South African marabi beats and American soulful blues – spilled out of the shebeens, lifting hearts and growing the passion for freedom. The music itself was a defiant middle finger to the apartheid authorities, creating stars like Makeba, Hugh Masakela and so many other artists. It crossed international borders and spread the message that black South Africans were human, living, loving and creating, and, under apartheid, dying.

Shebeens thrived after the 1927 Liquor Act, which among other restrictions "prohibited Africans and Indians from selling alcohol or entering licensed premises". While African women were uniquely suited to brewing beer given their traditional skills, their growing role as shebeen queens was also dictated by legislation. As they did not have to carry passes until the 1950s, they were undesirable employees, their movements uncontrollable. They were economic wild cards, often single women making a living in a male-dominated society. And as shebeens became more popular, their risky livelihoods were threatened. Along with evading arrest and having their products confiscated, they eventually faced stiff competition.

Apartheid profits from beer sales

The 1927 Liquor Act may have spurred the growth of shebeens, but from 1937, municipal drinking halls encroached on the women's businesses. The profits from the halls benefitted the municipalities, but unlike the shebeen queens' incomes, never trickled through to the families supported by the businesses. By the 1960s, despite protests, more than 60 municipalities operated legal beer halls; black African women controlled the illegal business. There were more than 10 000 shebeens in Soweto alone, and some 30 000 illegal brewers had set up shop in the Western Cape. The women were powerful, walking tall in their independence, and often berated the men who drank at the beer halls for not supporting their community-centred businesses.

Their reign was soon to end though. The Act had restricted profits for commercial brewers, and in 1962 the apartheid government caved under pressure from the industry and opened up sales to black South Africans. They could not drink in town – white areas – but they could now buy commercial beer at off-sales. South African Breweries and the apartheid state saw their profits grow.

Despite their waning stars, the shebeen queens have become a celebrated archetype in South African art, film and literature. Fred Khumalo's protagonist, Lettie, in *Bitches' Brew*, chooses the life when her teen lover turns out to be unworthy; in *Down Second Avenue*, Es'kia Mphahlele describes the economic independence being a shebeen queen offered: "The same old cycle. Leave school, my daughter, and work, you cannot sit at home and have other people work for you; stand up and do the white man's washing and sell beer. That's right – that is how a woman does it; look at us, we do not sit and look up to our husbands or fathers to work alone; we have sent our children to school with money from beer selling..."

Read the full article at <https://www.brandsouthafrica.com/people-culture/long-reign-of-the-south-african-shebeen-queen>

A point that cannot be stressed enough, is to not be redundant just to make up the word count.

When you are writing your essay, a good way to form a paragraph is to write down what main idea you intend to focus on and formulate it around that.

Remember that trying to take a short cut is how people sometimes end up lost. Be patient and follow the steps.

Your essay can be written in bits and then put together to form the final piece, as long as it is a cohesive piece of work.

Be sure to check your punctuation and grammar. Be wary of writing in the manner that you speak. This is a formal academic essay.

GOODLUCK WITH YOUR WRITING ☐

COMPILED BY SHALENE BELLA OMADAT. PLEASE BE MINDFUL NOT TO PASS THIS OFF AS YOUR OWN.