

How literary features develops a theme: the changing of identity

The extract from the short story Kwashiorkor (1972) by Can Themba is a fictional story in which the author depicts the life of a boy named Abner as he migrates from rural South Africa to Johannesburg during the apartheid era. The length of the extract should not be underestimated as it still comprises many literary features that show the thematic development of how Abner's identity changes upon his migration to the city. Following in this essay will be a detailed analysis to show how the extract's literary features develop the overall theme.

The author initiates this passage with the sentence adverb "First," which indicates an initial point of departure but also gives an indication of importance for what is to follow. "First, there were the ordinary problems of adjustment": this suggests that above all, adjusting to a new geographic location would be ordinarily problematic to anybody and gives an indication of the most basic problem one faces when migrating from rural to urban city life – fitting in.

Also, the phrases "tribal boy" and "big city" shows how the change of identity is taking place and how a boy related to a certain set of beliefs and possibly belonging to a group of people with common ancestry ("tribal") had to adjust to a completely different environment – the big city which is "vast, fast-moving, frenetic".

A metamorphose effect is also created by the word "boy" in the first sentence of the passage and "man" in the fourth sentence suggesting that because of Abner's continual change, he transitioned from being a boy in his hometown, to becoming a man in the city, thus giving the extract the notion of a bildungsroman – the development and maturation of the protagonist, Abner. Therefore, the choice of words – diction – the author uses is particularly clever in that it gives a transitional effect throughout this passage thereby showing how the theme of a change of identity is being developed.

Other literary features the author employs in this passage includes figurative language such as the simile "leaping like a flea from contingency to contingency" which also adds to the imagery. Here one would imagine Abner taking a huge leap from his old way of life, to his new one as if to say that he was physically jumping over without having to properly adjust or settle from the one to the other. The word "fracture" also connotes a broken bone so the metaphor "customs had to be fractured overnight" compares Abner's customs to that of a broken bone. This clearly symbolises the spiritual changes he had to undergo when migrating from rural to urban South Africa – he needed to break his old traditions to make room for a more modern lifestyle and this he had to do almost instantaneously, "overnight".

Moreover, the changes of Abner's identity occur, as previously mentioned, because he needed to fit in. Thus, his "sincere and instinctive" reactions needed

to be withheld because they “were laughed at in the city”. Here the author distinctly contrasts the manner of behaviour between people from rural and urban areas and implies that those from rural areas proceed with more genuine feelings “sincere”, while they are held up as objects of ridicule “laughed at in the city” by those people from the city who can for this reason be regarded as impolite. Abner’s fear of being mocked and ridiculed for being different, therefore contributes to the theme - his change of identity.

On top of that, there are many other ways in which the author portrays the contrast between rural South Africa and the city. This is especially evident by the phrases “tribal boy” and “big city” which suggests that the tribal (rural) areas are much smaller in comparison to the big city. The word “vast” refers to that which is huge and extensive which is what the city is as opposed to the aforementioned, smaller rural areas. The words “fast-moving” and “frenetic” signifies the pace at which the city life progresses or occurs in polarity to the quiet, slow-paced rural areas. In addition, the word “feverish” signifies the excitement or energy in which city life is characterised in comparison to the calmer rural areas.

Into the bargain, the punctuation used in the extract includes many commas giving the illusion that sentences are shorter, speeding up the pace of the extract – thereby creating excitement and panic which is synonymous to what Abner experiences during his migration to the “fast-moving, frenetic” city life. The repetition of “or” on the other hand, in “Mopedi or Mosuto or Xhosa or a Zulu” contrastingly may seem monotonous to the reader in having to repeat the same word continuously. Here, with the monotony, the author shows the disinterest of city people “nobody seemed to care” of rural people’s cultural differences in the big city.

Over and above that, the word “just” in the clause “you were just an African here”, suggests that there is nothing extraordinary about Abner’s cultural group in which he identifies himself whether it be Mopedi, Mosuto, Xhosa or Zulu, he is just a regular African in the city. Although he has moved from one type of lifestyle to another, “nobody seemed to care”. He’s change of identity, was therefore something he had to undergo by himself.

Another important aspect to consider is the binary opposition “here” and “there” as well as “now” and “then” which adds to the contrasting and transitional effect of the extract – from one way, to another. “now and then” Furthermore, suggests that the African and the white man only occasionally had conflict “impinge” but then the phrase “indeed often” immediately opposes and rectifies this statement by implying that it happens rather frequently and that the white man that was “somewhere there” could cause an unwanted and “painful” effect (“impinge”) upon interaction (experiences for black people in South Africa in the apartheid era was generally unpleasant). Furthermore, “Africans” connotes the generalisation that all Africans are black; therefore “Africans here” sets the black

people apart from the “white man” that is “somewhere there”, thereby further creating division between Abner’s rural area and the white man’s urban area.

Furthermore, the differences between the rural South Africa and the city that has been shown, is significant in that it is synonymous to the changes undergone by Abner. As he had adapted to his new surroundings, his life has automatically become “vast, fast-moving, frenetic” from slow-paced and his character had also changed from calm and quiet, to “feverish” just as the city was.

In conclusion, it is evident that the literary features used in the text is done so in order to show the thematic development which is the changing of identity that Abner had to undergo when he migrated from the rural South Africa to the urban city life. It is also clear that the diction used generally creates a contrasting effect from his quiet life to a much faster life just as the punctuation used creates this effect in that the pace the reader reads is similar to that of the pace of Abner’s changing lifestyle.

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