

City Johannesburg

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City Johannesburg by Mongane Wally Serote

1 This way I salute you:
My hand pulses to my back trouser pocket
Or into my inner jacket pocket
For my pass, my life,
5 Jo'burg City.
My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets
For my thin, ever lean wallet,
While my stomach groans a friendly smile to hunger,
Jo'burg City.
10 My stomach also devours coppers and papers
Don't you know?
Jo'burg City, I salute you;
When I run out, or roar in a bus to you,
I leave behind me, my love,
15 My comic houses and people, my dongas and my ever whirling
dust,
My death
That's so related to me as a wink to the eye.
Jo'burg City
I travel on your black and white roboted roads
20 Through your thick iron breath that you inhale
At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.
Jo'burg City
That is the time that I come to you,
When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,
25 That is the time when I leave you,
When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the falling dark-
ness
On your cement trees.
And as I go back, to my love,
My dongas, my dust, my people, my death,
30 Where death lurks in the dark like a blade in the flesh,
I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness
In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,
And everything about you says it, That, that is all you need of me.
Jo'burg City, Johannesburg,
35 Listen when I tell you,
There is no fun, nothing, in it.
When you leave the women and men with such frozen expressions,
Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil erosion,
Jo'burg City, you are dry like death,
40 Jo'burg City, Johannesburg, Jo'burg City.

On Serote's 'City Johannesburg'

Posted by wbxingyiq under [on south/african writing](#)

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Analysis of the metaphorical language in "City Johannesburg"

The title of the poem could be seen as the central Tenor, metaphorically specified by a number of underlying vehicle and/or metaphorical constructions, which all serve to illustrate the ambiguous relationship the lyrical subject has with the city Johannesburg. The title may also suggest a central Vehicle referring to the conditions black people were subjected to during the apartheid era. In other words, as a central Tenor in the poem the title refers to the city only, but as a Vehicle, the title alludes to a deeper meaning that characterizes the oppressive nature of apartheid. Regardless of the reading one would prefer, "City Johannesburg" is about Johannesburg during the apartheid era and the lyrical subject vividly describes how s/he experiences the city in this era of ethnic oppression.

Line 1 introduces the lyrical subject's purpose in the poem by stating "This way I salute you". This, then, is a poem that pays a form of tribute to Johannesburg (the personification of Johannesburg as "you") as if the city is remarkable in some way and is deserving of praise.

However, the irony of this salutation is immediately overshadowed by lines 2 to 4 when the speaker states "My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket/Or into my inner jacket pocket/For my pass, my life,". We realise that the Tenor in this metaphorical construction "My hand" and the verbal focus "pulses" constitute a metaphorical construction because it is language that has been deliberately made different.

However, the objects "my pass" and "my life" are related to the subject and main verb because the connective word "Or" and the linking word "For" in lines 3 and 4 respectively extend the construction past line 2. So, to understand the hidden metaphor included in these lines we can read line 4 as, "My hand pulses for my pass [and] my life". The objects "my pass, my life" are linked to the subject "My hand" by the verbal focus "pulses".

So, because of our understanding and knowledge of the world, we know that this constitutes an extended metaphorical construction as it is illogical and impossible for one's hand to "pulse" for one's pass and/or life. In addition, the verbal focus "pulses" makes one think of a heartbeat – or more specifically an indication of life, as we are considered "alive" as long as we have a pulse rate. One's heart beats faster when one is nervous or threatened in some way and the lyrical subject beautifully expresses the nervous condition caused by and attributed to black people having to carry passes during the apartheid era.

City Johannesburg

The reading that “City Johannesburg” is a central Vehicle in the text is plausible here as this city is responsible for creating a nervous condition within the lyrical subject.

Other metaphors are presented in the poem that further highlight black people’s physical and psychological conditions of being removed from their homes in the countryside and sent to work in the cities. Johannesburg is then an example of one of these cities where blacks were forced to work (in the mines for instance). Lines 20 to 27 are noteworthy because the lyrical subject describes his/her experience of travelling to and from work:

20 Through your thick iron breath that you inhale

21 At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.

22 Jo’burg City.

23 That is the time when I come to you,

24 When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,

25 That is the time when I leave you,

26 When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the falling darkness

27 On your cement trees.

The city is described as a cold, lifeless entity ironically personified and given “natural” attributes. For example, the adjectival and verbal foci in line 20:

20 Through your thick iron breath that you inhale

Nom. focus Adj. focus Nom. focus Verbal focus

(Implying Jo’burg City)

(Vehicle)

The underlying tenor vehicle relation in this construction could be read then as “Jo’burg City inhales an iron breath”.

Furthermore, in the construction in line 24, “When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,” the metaphor is used to personify the cityscape using natural phenomena such as flowers and the wind. The irony here is that cities usually lack these forms of natural phenomena and it is as if the speaker wishes to foreground the man-made features of Johannesburg’s urban landscape.

To illustrate, the adjectival focus “neon” qualifies “flowers” and is also figurative because “neon” is usually associated with things like lights and not flowers. As “neon flowers” is the thing which is being possessed by the possessive pronoun “your” (Jo’burg City), we can also say that the adjectival phrase “neon flowers” qualifies the subject/Tenor “Jo’burg City”.

City Johannesburg

The adjectival focus “electrical” qualifies “wind” and is also used figuratively. The word “electrical” is usually associated with man-made features that require electricity for functioning.

In line 24, “wind” is used metaphorically because “wind” is a natural phenomenon. The effect of this personification of the city serves primarily to drive the global Tenor-Vehicle relationship and highlights the inescapable relationship the lyrical subject has with the city, irrespective of how cruel the city may be.

The global Tenor-Vehicle relationship is used to embed metaphorical constructions that illustrate an ironic relationship to a city which is without life and meaning for the speaker.

Line 40 is exemplary and the lyrical subject exclaims:

40 Jo’burg City, you are dry like death,
(Nom. Focus Adj. Focus Nom. Focus)

This metaphorical construction equates “Jo’burg City” with death by means of the vehicle “dry”. Johannesburg, then, is a city which is empty of water (suggesting nourishment and/or life) and so lifeless; a place where the lyrical subject starves.

In conclusion, the metaphors in the poem combine with the global metaphorical construction to conjure up images of suffering, oppression, and as Johannesburg is known is known for its riches attributed to gold mining, the way it is described in this poem portrays the “feebleness/In [the] flesh, in [the] mind, [and] in [the] blood.” (lines 31 – 32) experienced by migrant workers during apartheid.

As a global Tenor “City Johannesburg” describes how this is a place where the lyrical subject has to live, yet despises. And as a global Vehicle, “City Johannesburg” offers us a glimpse of the irony of being alive was like during the apartheid era.