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***The New Century of South African Poetry* edited by Michael Chapman.**

Johannesburg, South Africa's biggest city and capital of the Gauteng province, began as a 19<sup>th</sup> century gold-mining settlement. The "city of gold" as it is often referred to as, is a city filled with job opportunities and relationships for many people who decide settle and work in its precinct. The experiences, memories and emotions that the city has shared for decades can easily be translated into words in the form of poetry. Different people experience the city in different ways and it is often expressed using language and imagery in poetry. The poem "Johannesburg" which is written by William Plomer can be compared by virtue of experience and memory to the poem "City Johannesburg" by Mongane Wally Serote. The aim of this essay, therefore, is to compare and shed light into the different experiences in Johannesburg as expressed by the above mentioned writers. The essay will focus firstly, on the similarities such as the title, theme and settings of the poems and will in turn target the different contrasting aspects of the poems which are of equal importance. The aspects which are in contrast include; the positions of the speakers as well as their experiences in the City of Johannesburg.

Wrong word

Poets

Why is your introduction on its own page?

Poor formulation

The titles of the poems take on similar names; “Johannesburg” and “City Johannesburg” respectively and gives the reader an idea of what to expect **the poem to be about**. The poem “City Johannesburg” is based on the relationship between the speaker, who is an African person working in the city and the city itself. The speaker in this poem makes continuous reference to the title of the city which can be seen on the phrases “Jo’burg City” (ll. 5; 10; 12; 19; 22; 34; 40). The use and repetition of the name “Jo’burg City”, which is a colloquial word for Johannesburg displays and reinforces the relationship between the city and the writer as being intimate. Similarly in the poem “Johannesburg” the speaker shares information about the city from another perspective which could be one of an observer rather than a person working in the city.

Wrong preposition

The different poems share a common underlying theme and meaning which is an aim to expose the city for what it truly is. While many people often perceive the place “Johannesburg” as a city full of joy and excitement, the **writers** of these poems provide a different side to it. In the poem “Johannesburg” by William Plomer, he begins by expressing and describing his experience in the city in a positive light which can be seen in the first stanza: “fortunes were founded overnight, And mansions rose among the rocks to blaze with girls and light” (l.2-4). These lines provide a minor theme which reflects the city in a positive and beautiful light but it is then shadowed by the main idea or major theme. The major theme in this poem is that of morality, bitterness and disappointment as experienced by the writer; “Pioneers, O pioneers” (l.21) and “Grey pillars of a Christian State, Respectability has turned, Swashbuckler prim and scamp sedate” (l.22-24). The aforesaid lines speak of how men who were Christian and from a Christian state turned to mischievous unrespectable people because of the gold in the city of Johannesburg. The previous stanzas; (stanza 5) also reveal information about how the experience often involved cruelty and violence. Likewise, in the poem “City Johannesburg” the writer uses an extension of words to support the underlying theme of exposing and revealing what the city is like. The writer uses imagery when he compares his hand to “a starved snake” (l.6). Because the poem was written during the Apartheid days, the city of Johannesburg did not have much love and comfort for African people, who went through starvation and cheap labour.

Such as?

Something missing

The poems in question have similar settings which are of a Post-Colonial South Africa and the modern mining industry in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This era saw the boom in the mining industry and a development of the “City of Gold”, Johannesburg. Both the poems are written as an experience and reflection of the experiences in the city. The environment and the circumstances surrounding the composition of these poems are directly linked to the imagery and choice of words that are used in the poem. In the poem “City Johannesburg”, Mongane Wally Serote writes and provides information about the timeframe in years when he experienced Johannesburg on a first-hand basis. In the first stanza (l.1-4), the writer also gives the reader a personal account by the use of the personal pronoun “My” (l.2) of what it was like being an African in those days because it meant that he was always required to carry his “Pass” (l.4). The “Pass” or “Dompas” was a form of identification that black people were obliged to carry around as part of the laws by the Apartheid Government. Likewise, William Plomer also provides information in the very first line of the poem “Johannesburg”, where he states “Along the Rand in eight-five” (l.1) which is a moment when the mining-boom occurred in Johannesburg. This time period involved settlers who travelled to South Africa to explore gold. The writer also provides information about the chronological time period; “Seek now the nuggets of your prime, and sift the gold dust of your dreams” (l. 26-27). These lines provide important information about who, what and when this poem speaks about. The word “Nugget” (l.26) is a very old or tradition meaning for “a small lump of gold” and it shows the time setting that the writer wishes to provide.

Your paragraphs are a bit long. Be careful of trying to address more than one issue per paragraph; it might lead to a loss of focus.

Understanding that the poems were written in a time when capitalism was rife and apartheid widespread it means that the positions of the speakers are in contrast or based on two individual opposing accounts. The poem “Johannesburg” by William Plomer, evidently exploits and experiences life in “Johannesburg” from a capitalist or explorer standpoint. The writer speaks of the evils of capitalism and how the city “Johannesburg” was formed. In the first stanza, the **writer** uses imagery to depict the kind of lifestyle that the capitalists enjoyed and how the young men enjoyed the fruits of their labour “And mansions rose among the rocks” (l.3). This line is evidence of how the gold rush benefitted many settlers who built mansions using the proceeds from the mining of the gold in Johannesburg. The kinds of lifestyles that the capitalist lived is described in more detail in the second stanza “In champagne baths men sluices their skin” (l.5). The word “Sluices” in this line describes how much gold was up for grabs for the capitalists during this period of the gold rush. “Sluices” (l.5), meaning, “showering with” is used as imagery to suggest that the men actually showered with the gold. The **writer** also provides information as to how the gold was acquired in “Riding bareback under stars, as lordly anarchs of the veld” (l.17-18). These lines once again provide insight into how the men conquered the land or open field “Veld” (l.18). The **writer** goes as far as expressing, by the use of diction, how the hunger for gold led to tribal wars and free cruelty in the land that they invaded, “Venison feasts and tribal wars, Free cruelty and a cartridge belt” (l.19-20). However, with all the riches and glamour in the life of a gold explorer in “Johannesburg”, the writer reminds the workers who laboured for the gold that they are “pioneers” (l.21) who have lost their “Christian” (l.22) faith and “respectability” (l.23) which can be seen as a disappointment in their state. The disappointment is in line with the lifestyle that they lived during their youth.

Word form

However, in contrast to the experience by William Plomer, the poem “City Johannesburg” by Mongane Wally Serote describes how divided the country was and how black people were treated during this era. In the opening line, the speaker ironically “salutes” the city-“This way I salute you” (l.1) and what is ironic about this is how much pain and suffering the city of “Johannesburg” has brought to this particular individual but he still has the courage to say “I salute you”. The “salute” is no ordinary salute but a contradiction to the actual meaning of the word. The writer also uses imagery in: My hand thin like a starved snake” (l.6), which is a simile where he

Incorrect punctuation

compares his arms to a hungry snake (long and thin). This line gives the reader a preliminary glimpse of what to expect the speaker's experience to be like. The first few stanzas of this particular piece are in direct contradiction to William Plomer's experience of the city which many still believe is a city of dreams. "While my stomach groans a friendly smile to hunger" (l.8) is another example of how the writer uses imagery "Groans" to engage the reader into imagining the sound of the poor man's stomach. The poverty lifestyle that is experienced by the speaker can be seen as a direct opposite of ~~what~~ William Plomer's experience is, "My comic houses and people, my dongs" (l.15) can be compared to William Plomer's "And mansions rose among rocks" (l.3). This comparison is another point that provides insight into the different or contrasting experiences that both the speakers go through. Therefore, it can be stated that one person is a White person in South Africa and the latter is a black person and they are living or experiencing separate opposing worlds. The black African man in "City Johannesburg" lives in laughable "Comic houses" (l.15) while the other lives or experiences the "Mansion" (l.3). The writer in "City Johannesburg" continues to provide imaginable details of the conditions that they lived under and how "close" to death they were in; "where death lurks in the dark like a blade in the flesh" (l.30). According to the writer it is evident that there was no value for life for him or his "people" (l.29) during this time. This again proves that both speakers are speaking on different grounds, based on different experiences and individual frames of reference.

Your paragraphs are a bit long. Be careful of trying to address more than one issue per paragraph; it might lead to a loss of focus.

With all that has been said and relevant points presented regarding the themes, positions, titles and individual experiences, it can be concluded that the poem "City Johannesburg" by Mongane Wally Serote and the poem "Johannesburg" by William Plomer do take the reader on a journey of what the past era of Johannesburg used to be like as well as the differences in the people who lived and worked in it. Although there has been similarities in the texts, which are of great significance in providing the history, the contrast in the texts display an even greater divide and challenge which is still relevant today, in modern day "Johannesburg".

Bibliography

Plomer, William- "Johannesburg"

Serote, Mongane Wall – "City Johannesburg"

Consult the relevant style guide for guidance on in-text referencing and bibliography compilation.

ENG2603/101/3/2017

**DECLARATION REGARDING PLAGIARISM**

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**ASSIGNMENT NUMBER** 01  
**UNIQUE ASSIGNMENT NUMBER** 723061

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