

MEMORANDUM: “City Johannesburg”

Aim: To explore poetic convention in the poem

(See book: p. 108)

Type: Group discussion and written work

Grade level: 8, 9, 10

Time: 40–60 minutes

File section: Poetry

Instruction: Read the poem “City Johannesburg”. Work in groups. Discuss and answer the questions below, then share ideas when you report back to the class. Look at the mark in brackets; these provide guidance for how detailed your answer should be. Write your ideas down.

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 darkness
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.

Questions

- 1 What important information does the title convey?
The title tells us that the poem is about a specific place and setting, namely the city of Johannesburg✓.
 [1]
- 2 What kind of place or setting is this?
It is a demanding, harsh and alienating urban✓ environment.
 [1]
- 3 Find two examples of words or phrases that describe the setting.
“I can feel your roots, anchoring your might”✓ (line 31)
“Jo’burg City, you are dry like death...”✓ (line 39)
 [2]
- 4.1 Who is speaking in the poem?
The speaker is an African who travels to work in the city✓. (1)
- 4.2 What single word immediately alerts us to the presence of a speaker in the poem?
The word “I”✓ in the first line immediately suggests the presence of a first-person speaker. (1)
 [2]
- 5 Who or what is being addressed? How do you know?
The speaker addresses Johannesburg✓ directly. We know this because of the first words of the poem, “This way I salute you...”✓.
 [2]
- 6 In line 4, there is a clue to the setting in time. What does the word “pass” refer to here? And how does this help us identify the historical setting of the poem?
The “pass” is the identity document✓ all Africans had to carry with them under apartheid legislation. The pass showed whether someone had permission to work in the city. The mention of a pass tells us this poem is set in the apartheid era✓.
 [2]
- 7.1 In line 1, the speaker describes a “salute”. Who would you salute, and why?
Usually one would salute someone in authority✓, such as an officer in the army or the police. It is meant to show respect✓ for authority. (2)
- 7.2 How is this salute different to a conventional salute?
The “salute” in the poem is different, in that it takes the form of a frantic search✓ for the speaker’s pass. This indicates the speaker’s anxiety and fear✓ when in Johannesburg. (2)
 [4]
- 8 How does the speaker (“I”) feel about this place? Find two examples to support your ideas.
The speaker is apprehensive in Johannesburg, as we can see from the way he desperately searches for the pass that allows him to be in the

city. ✓ He also sees the city as a place of desperation and sorrow, as we see in the words “Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil erosion...” ✓ (line 38).

[2]

- 9 In “City Johannesburg”, the poet uses vivid imagery to evoke the relationship between the speaker and the city.

Learners’ answers might differ. These are suggestions:

- 9.1 Underline three images that you particularly like.

My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets

For my thin, ever lean wallet... (lines 6–7) ✓

Through your thick iron breath that you inhale

At six in the morning and exhale from five noon. (lines 20–21) ✓

When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the falling darkness

On your cement trees. (lines 26–27) ✓

(3 × 1)

- 9.2 Identify each image you underlined (metaphors, similes, etc).

The image in lines 6–7 is a simile ✓.

The image in lines 20–21 is personification ✓.

The image in lines 26–27 is a metaphor ✓.

(3 × 1)

- 9.3 Describe the comparisons in each image.

Lines 6–7 (simile): The hand searching for the pass is compared to the shape and movement of a snake ✓.

Lines 20–21 (personification): The city breathes and exhales ✓.

Lines 26–27 (metaphor): The lights of the city are compared to “neon flowers” and lamp posts are compared to “cement trees” ✓.

(3 × 1)

- 9.4 Explain each image you underlined: what it means to you, what it makes you think about, and what is striking about it.

Learners’ explanations link to the images they chose in number 91.

Here is a suggestion:

These images show different aspects of the city. In the first (lines 6–7)

we see the helplessness and humiliation ✓ of the speaker as he searches for the “pass” that allows him to work in the city, and which is therefore as important as his “life”. The second image (lines 20–21) shows the vast power of the city and also suggests pollution and industry ✓ (“Thick iron breath”). I identify with how small and powerless the speaker feels. The third image (lines 26–27) reveals the artificial beauty of the city in the dark ✓: nature has been replaced by “neon flowers” and “cement trees”. These lines help me to empathize with the speaker’s plight. The imagery is striking and unusual, allowing me to see the attraction of the city as well as the pain it causes. ✓

(3 × 1)

[12]

- 10 Write a clear description of what the poem is about. Explain and justify your opinions
 “City Johannesburg” is about the relationship ✓ between the speaker, an African working in the city in the apartheid era, and the city, Johannesburg. He is at the mercy ✓ of the city, which is shown to be vast and powerful, a place of insecurity and sorrow for the speaker. The poem uses personification to show how the city exerts

control✓ over individuals and every aspect of their lives. Although the speaker works in the city, at night the speaker must travel back to the “comic houses” and dry “dongas”. The city leaves workers with “frozen expressions” on their faces, which shows how inhospitable✓ the city is towards its African worker [4]

Consolidation (Grades 8–10)

Now that you have discussed the poem, made notes and shared your ideas with the class, answer the questions above in writing, for assessment. Remember to write in clear, full sentences and to take note of the mark allocation. The accuracy and clarity of your writing will be assessed out of 3 marks.

(Accuracy and clarity of writing + 3)

Total marks: 35