

Mongane Wally Serote
City Johannesburg
More challenging questions

Worksheet by:
Keith Tankard
Knowledge4Africa.com

Mongane Wally Serote was born in Sophiatown in 1944. He grew up during the violent days of the apartheid era and was arrested on a few occasions, even serving nine months in solitary confinement in 1969 for an unspecified "crime", but was finally released without any charges being brought against him.

The poet was also under "house arrest" for three years, i.e. he was made a prisoner in his own house and forbidden to leave the grounds for whatever reason. Indeed, if a person was "banned" or placed under house arrest, there was no recourse to law. One could not challenge it -- nor did the banning authorities have to prove anything or even produce any evidence whatever to justify their decision.

In 1974 Serote was awarded the Fulbright scholarship which enabled him to study Fine Arts at the Columbia University in New York. He returned to South Africa in 1979 but chose to go into self-exile in Botswana, returning to South Africa only in 1990 with the collapse of the apartheid system. He would serve in the first post-apartheid parliament. He is renowned for his poetry, although he has also written short stories and a couple of novels. His work has won him several awards.

This is a somewhat out-of-date social comment about life in Johannesburg at the heart of the apartheid era. The narrator is a black South African who is discriminated against and whose purpose in the city is purely to supply the labour market. Life is one of hardship where working hours are long and happiness is non-existent.

1. "I leave behind me, my love,
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."
 - A textbook comments that the poet appears to have affection for the place in which he lives. Would you agree? (4)
 - Why are the houses and people said to be "comic"? (4)
 - If the poet is indeed speaking of Sophiatown as his home, what do his words tell us about the township? (4)
 - What is the link between "My death" and "a wink to the eye"? (2)

GENERAL:

5. Use just ONE word to describe the TONE of this poem. (1)
6. Apart from Johannesburg itself, list the other words and their meanings which place this poem in a particularly South African context. (4)
7. The poet personifies the city throughout this poem. How does he do it? Why? (4)

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