



CROSSING OVER



Chris Mann

THINKING POINTS

How much do you know about the stigma faced by people living with HIV/AIDS, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s?

Do you worry about the effects of HIV/AIDS on society, or have other health concerns become more pressing?

What is the best way to connect with someone who comes from a very different background from you, in your opinion and experience?

What aspect of social injustice do you come across most often?



THE POET: CHRIS MANN (1948 – 2021)

Chris Mann was born in the Eastern Cape and went to school at Bishops in Cape Town.

He studied English and Philosophy at the University of the Witwatersrand, and later went to Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar, where he was awarded an MA in English Language and Literature.

He also studied African Oral Literature at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

From 1977 to 1980 he lectured English at Rhodes University in Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown).

From 1980 to 1995 he worked with an NGO at KwaNyuswa outside Durban, where he received his isiZulu nickname, Zithulele, meaning 'the quiet one'.



THE POET: CHRIS MANN (1948 – 2021)

During this period, he began to turn to music to showcase his poetry and reach a wider audience, co-founding the band *Zabalaza*, which performed in both English and isiZulu.

One of the biggest gigs of his life was in 1990, when he performed his poem 'Till Love is Lord of the Land' in front of a crowd of over 100,000 at a rally in Durban to welcome Nelson Mandela after his release from prison.

In 1995, he returned to Makhanda where he became a professor of poetry at the Institute for the Study of English in Africa.

Mann could speak English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, isiXhosa and Italian and had a deep interest in the communities in which he lived and worked.

His poems have appeared in a wide range of journals, textbooks and anthologies in South Africa and abroad. He received many awards for his work, including the Olive Schreiner Prize for South African Poetry in English.

His poetry reflects the 'richness of the different languages he speaks and...his poems convey...the textural details of the South African landscape and the intimacy of its people'.¹



‘I felt their presences hug me back’



THE POEM – CROSSING OVER

Chris Mann said that he hoped this poem would evoke empathy and compassion in readers. It is based on a personal experience: Mann had been to an evening church service in Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown) on a cold, misty evening. While walking home, he caught up with the couple who had spoken to the congregation about their experience of living with AIDS.

Usually, when a couple stands in front of an altar, it represents a lifelong commitment (marriage). The altar - a sacred place for confession. Could represent emotional union and crossing over in phase.

I **d**rew abreast of them in the **d**rizzle
that **d**rifted across a railway-bridge,
two young adults, wrapped in scarves,
who'd spoken that evening in church.

The alliteration of the heavy 'd' sound sets up the oppressive, eerie mood at the start of the poem. The first stanza does not reveal what they spoke about, which adds to a sense of mystery.

They'd stood in front of the altar,
a man and a woman, beside a priest
and great bowls of **aloes and lilies**
and told us how they lived with Aids.

Ironic Pun

- Disease
- Support

Irony: A word that means „support” is a word used for a „disease”

In Christianity, lilies symbolise beauty, purity and renewal. Similarly, aloes represent healing and purity.



THE STRUGGLE AND THE STIGMA

Metaphor for their struggle, navigating life with AIDS or moving with societal challenges. Climbed means they overcame their fear and were able to share their story. Symbol of courage.

Couples fear

Phantoms: Ghostly looking figures. Symbolic: Couple seems like spirits crossing over between life and death

The **streets** they climbed, so **slowly** that **Sunday** night had gone all quiet, as if the fear of some terrible event had emptied the whole small town.

The **feeble** blurs of the street-lights, sunk in the mist above the bridge, had greyed the shapes in front of me to phantoms in some life beyond.

Euphemism: afterlife = 'some life beyond' rather than call it 'heaven'?

Sibilance
-More eerie, sinister and adds to height of tension.
Slowly- weakness due to illness

In this instance, 'feeble' can be interpreted as a transferred epithet. Could represent the speakers(emotional) or couples(physical) weakness.
Feeble- weak/faint

THE MEETING

Exclamation mark:
Speaker awkward
attempt at
cheerfulness

The use of dialogue creates a connection
between the speaker and the couple, but it
also reflects the awkwardness of their
interaction.

**Enjambment between
these stanzas:** the
focus on their faces
lingers. Keeps
attention of them for
longer.

A moment! I said to them, hollowly.
Thank you for visiting our church!
They paused, and turning their eyes,
their wan and **haggard young** faces
towards me in the drizzled gloom
greeted me with a cheery warmth
that made me want to curse aloud
and turn my face aside and weep.

The couple's physical
weakness, and
perhaps emotional
weariness is
emphasised when
we see that they
only turn their eyes
rather than their
heads.

Speaker feels overwhelmed and guilty- The couples unexpected warmth
and cheer, despite their suffering, shames and moves him so deeply.

- ❑ Wan: Pale
- ❑ Haggard: Tired
- ❑ Haggard
young(oxymoron)

CONNECTION DESPITE DIFFERENCE

Oxymoron

- The hug felt momentary and deeply lasting which suggest the speakers powerful emotional connection. His compassion and empathy makes time feel suspended

They drew back, sensing my distress.
I hugged them, and for a moment,
a strange **short eternity** out of time,
I felt their presences hug me back,

Crossing over might not mean death but rather emotional or spiritual connection. He crosses the divide between healthy and the dying

I who lived this side of the tracks,
in the suburbs, the gardens of life,
And they who'd already crossed over
into the hard streets of life-in-death.

The 'tracks' symbolise a divide that is not just geographical.

The poem ends with a reminder of how different the speaker is from the couple he meets. The man and woman are close to death, but the speaker is also pointing to social inequalities. Speaker sees the divide in health and financially. He understand how different his life is. He feels empathetic for those facing mortality

This image of Makhanda shows the wealthier, tree-lined suburbs in the foreground with the poorer, stark township stretching up the hills.



THEMES

The difficulty of living with illness that carries stigma with it

Connecting with people who are different to oneself



Social and economic inequalities in society

The necessity of empathy and compassion



- **Tone:** reflective, somber, uneasy, compassionate, emphatic
- **Mood:** haunting, melancholic, quiet, contemplative
- **Structure:** free verse, enjambment, no strict rhyme, shifts between observation and reflection
- **Imagery:**
 - Mist, dim streetlights → ghostly
 - Altar, lilies → ceremonial
 - Wan and haggard faces → frailty
 - Streets climbed slowly → effort, movement
- **Effects of devices:**
 - Sibilance → eerie, whispering quality
 - Exclamation marks → sudden emotion, awkward cheerfulness
 - Oxymoron “short eternity” → moment feels long, suspended