



Motho ke Motho ka Batho Babang (A person is a person because of other people) – Jeremy Cronin

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CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

Jeremy Cronin (Simon's Town, 12 September 1949) studied at the University of Cape Town where he became a member of the Radical Student Society and later recruited into the banned South African Communist Party (SACP). He gained his MA in philosophy from Sorbonne (France) before returning to lecture at UCT. In 1976 he was arrested for distributing pamphlets for the banned African National Congress. His seven years in jail as a political prisoner gave rise to a volume of poetry which won the Ingrid Jonker Prize in 1984. He spent three years in exile in London and Lusaka before returning home in 1990. President Jacob Zuma appointed him Deputy Minister of Transport on 10 May 2009. On 12 June 2012 he assumed office as Deputy Minister of Public Works, where he serves to this day.

About this poem

- "Motho ke motho ka batho babang" means "A person is a person because of other people".
- Cronin wrote this poem whilst serving his sentence in a Pretoria prison.
- This poem captures the scene of one prisoner communicating discreetly with another, under the watchful eye of a warder. The cleverness of the participants is shown as they find ways to maintain human contact, communicating with sign language in defiance of the deprivation of imprisonment.
- As readers, we are invited to imagine how the human connection described in the scene would have provided the speaker with considerable comfort, strength and encouragement. This scene demonstrates *ubuntu* in action.

IMAGERY

SYMBOLS

- **THE MIRROR** – a symbol of seeing the world in a wider context within the confinement of the prison walls. Also a symbol of the freedom and part communication amongst the prisoners
- **THE CLENCHED FIST** – the BLACK POWER symbol that symbolised the defiance and resistance against Apartheid. When seen it created solidarity and motivation to continue the fight against inequality.
- **THE FREE HAND** - becomes a 'voice' that communicates soundlessly but yet meaningfully. Words are formed in the air so to speak.

SIMILE – 'And wiggle like two antennae' ... Antennae are used by insects to detect danger or obstacles but also as a way of identification and communication. The wiggling fingers became a means of communication.

SYNECHDOCHE – 'voice from around the corner' is a reference to the warden who is out of sight but through his questioning and commanding tone he makes everyone aware that they are being watched.

IRONY - 'later we can speak', the word 'speak' is ironic as the prisoners are not speaking but communicating using signs and gestures.

ALLITERATION – 'slow, slow rhythm of his work' – the repetition of 'sl' sound and the word 'slow', slows down the pace of the poem and creates an impression of the tedium of the prisoners' lives and the slow pace they are working at.

STRUCTURE

- Free verse using enjambment that creates a natural conversational flow as if the speaker is speaking directly to the reader.
- Importance of **the VISUAL LAYOUT**:
The narrative is provided on the left, while a 'translation' is provided in brackets on the right. The **messages/communication between the prisoners** are on the **right** of the page which set them apart from what the speaker sees. The warder's words are in the middle of the page, which is an indication that he is not part of the same conversation between the prisoners.
- The format of this translation or explanation is 2 columns and 2 rows. The first insertion in line 12 announces itself as an

THEMES

- **UBUNTU** – means 'humanity' and can be translated as 'I am because we are' or 'humanity towards others' but in a more philosophical term it means 'the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity' like the bond between the prisoners.
- **COMMUNICATION** – the meaning behind communication does not always have to be encapsulated in words but is equally as effective in symbols and signs.
- **DEFIANCE** - despite the confinement the symbols of unity were still there and the prisoners drew strength and encouragement from each other in their own secret ways.

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explanation, the second (line 15) and third (line 19) give the explanation directly, while the last insertions lose their impact, as if the reader has now learned the poem's language and no longer needs them.

- The **ITALICS** show communication, the prisoners' silent communication and warder's direct speech are in italics – placing much more importance on the silent messages.

TONE/MOOD

Mood: Almost defiant as the prisoners still manage to communicate effectively despite the enforced silence and prohibition on speech.

Tone: Intimate, conversational and secretive as the messages are subtle and understood by the prisoners who knew the secret codes of the sign language. The sense of intimacy is increased by the instantaneous understanding of the sign language. The fact that the communication is understood shows the defiance that existed despite the confining environment, right under the noses of the authorities.

DICTION

- This poem uses punctuation and typography (the way in which it is printed or set out) to convey the poet's message.
- Notice the poet's use of italics for different purposes, as well as the use of dashes. The use of italics in lines 20 and 22 seems to indicate direct speech. It is most effective that 'Strength brother' (line 26) is also written this way, as the two prisoners are communicating so effectively they may as well be using direct speech.
- The use of the present tense makes the content feel immediate, and in the last stages of the poem, as we are instructed to watch, we feel as though we are sharing the cell and watching the signals with the speaker.
- The title is a stark reminder that people are connected in so many ways and that it is incumbent to acknowledge those relations especially during the dark times of Apartheid, but even now that we have a responsibility towards each other.
- Words like 'warden', 'prisoner' and 'brother' reflect the power relations in the poem, the warden is authoritarian and the prisoners stripped of freedom. The word 'brother' though creates a different power relationship, one that suggest unity, comradeship and giving a sense of a shared humanity and comfort in adversity.