



MOTHO KE
MOTHO BATHO
BABANG (A PERSON
IS A PERSON
BECAUSE OF
OTHER PEOPLE)

JEREMY CRONIN

BACKGROUND OF THE POET

Jeremy Cronin was born in Cape Town, in South Africa, in 1949. He became active in the South African Communist Party, and was arrested and sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for being active in the struggle against apartheid. After he was released, and South Africa became a democracy, he became a member of parliament.



DURING READING

1. How many languages are used in this poem?
Name them.
2. What is the term given to the African philosophy of the title?
3. Notice Cronin's use of brackets, italics and line arrangement to describe the incident. How does this help the reader to understand the poem?

MOTHO KE MOTHO KA BATHO BABANG – Jeremy

Cronin (A Person is a Person Because of Other People)

1 By holding my mirror out of the window I see
2 Clear to the end of the passage.
3 There's a person down there.
4 A prisoner polishing a doorhandle.
5 In the mirror I see him see
6 My face in the mirror,
7 I see the fingertips of his free hand
8 Bunch together, as if to make
9 An object the size of a badge
10 Which travels up to his forehead
11 The place of an imaginary cap.
12 (This means: *A warder.*)
13 Two fingers are extended in a vee
14 And wiggle like two antennae.
15 (He's being watched.)
16 A finger of his free hand makes a watch-hand's arc
17 On the wrist of his polishing arm without
18 Disrupting the slow-slow rhythm of his work.
19 (Later. Maybe later we can speak.)
20 *Hey! Wat maak jy daar?*
21 – a voice from around the corner.
22 *No. Just polishing baas.*
23 He turns back to me, now watch
24 His free hand, the talkative one,
25 Slips quietly behind
26 – *Strength brother, it says,*
27 In my mirror,
A black fist.

CONTENT

- 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.

FORM AND STRUCTURE

- A noticeable feature of this poem is its visual layout. The narrative is provided on the left, while a 'translation' is provided in brackets on the right.
- The format of this translation or explanation is varied as the poem progresses.
- The first insertion in line 12 announces itself as an explanation, the second (line 15) and third (line 19) give the explanation directly, while the last insertions lose the brackets, as if the reader has now learned the poem's language and no longer needs them.

(This means: *A warder*)
Two fingers are extended in a vee
And wiggle like two antennae.
(He's being watched.)
A finger of his free hand makes a watch-hand's arc
On the wrist of his polishing arm without
Disrupting the slow-slow rhythm of his work.
(*Later. Maybe later we can speak.*)

POETIC/LANGUAGE DEVICES

- 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.

20 *Hey! Wat maak jy daar?*

21 – a voice from around the corner.

22 *No. Just polishing baas.*

23 He turns back to me, now watch

24 His free hand, the talkative one,

25 Slips quietly behind

25 – *Strength brother*, it says,

26 In my mirror,

POETIC/LANGUAGE DEVICES

- 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.

20

Hey! Wat maak jy daar?

21

– a voice from around the corner.

22

No. Just polishing baas.

23

He turns back to me, now watch

24

His free hand, the talkative one,

25

Slips quietly behind

25

– *Strength brother, it says,*

26

In my mirror,

Vocabulary:

Baas: boss

Wat maak jy daar?: What are you doing there?

VOCABULARY

QUESTIONS

1. Explain the significance of the 'mirror' to the prisoners. (2)
2. Suggest a reason for the reference to 'person' (line 3) and then 'prisoner' (line 4) (2)
3. Refer to lines 13-14: 'Two fingers are ... like two antennae.' Discuss the effectiveness of this image in the context of the poem. (3)
4. Refer to line 28: 'A black fist.' In your view, is this line an appropriate conclusion to the poem? Justify your response. (3)

