

At a funeral – Dennis Brutus

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About the poet

- Dennis Vincent Brutus was born on 28 November 1924 in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).
- He died of prostate cancer on 26 December 2009 in his home in Cape Town.
- His parents were teachers. They moved to South Africa when Dennis Brutus was a small boy.
- He graduated from Wits University (1960-62).
- Dennis Brutus was a poet, journalist, academic and anti-apartheid activist.
- He is known for leading the campaign for South Africa to be banned from the Olympic Games.

About the poet (continue)

- In 1963 he was shot in broad daylight by a white policeman.
- Dennis Brutus was imprisoned for 18 months, accused of breaking his banning order of not meeting more than two people outside of his family.
- He left South Africa in 1971 and took refuge in the USA where he taught in numerous universities as professor of African Literature.

What is the poem about

In an interview, Brutus explained that the poem is about a young woman called Valencia Majombozi, an African woman who managed to qualify as a doctor after enormous hardship and sacrifice by her parents. Her mother was a domestic servant, doing washing and ironing and cleaning (for white families), and put her through university. She got her medical degree. Sadly and ironically, just after she had completed her internship, she died. The poem is about Valencia's funeral. The poet contrasts the 'pageantry' and 'panoply' of the funeral to the 'hungry grave.' The poem is about the years of sacrifice that ended in nothing. It is an expression of frustration and aborted 'gifts' and 'hopes'.

At a funeral



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Mr F.D.Sebe

The mourners



The mourners - academics



2023/02/16



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Black, green and gold (of the resistance movement)



... pageantry



... stubbled graves ...



Brass band



.... mud (that) devours gifts, hopes ...



.... carrion book of birth



Death's head tyranny



The prison cell



Arise!... Better ... die, than ... lie down



The poem in a nutshell

- The funeral of a young woman (Valencia Majombozi).
- Nurses (and other medical practitioners) came in numbers to bury her.
- The funeral was well-arranged with a brass band playing music.
- The funeral (a display or the ceremony) frustrates the speaker. He says it is meaningless ('hollow') as death has taken the 'gifts' and *aborted* 'hopes'.
- The speaker comments that (in South Africa), black people die ('carrion') from birth because of the pass book (ID).

What is the poem about (continue)

- The speaker then calls people to take up arms ('Arise, line 9) (against the government/oppression/the pass laws).
- The speaker says it is not death that mauls down blacks, but the white government ('death's-head tyranny').
- He says the government throws black people into prisons ('narrow cells').
- He says the life of blacks is pain, defeat and deprivation ('dearth').
- The poem ends with a shocking statement: 'Better that we should die, than that we should lie down.' (blacks should be prepared to die rather than accept their lot without a fight).

Let us unpack the poem

1. The title

- * It reveals the subject matter of the poem – the funeral (or death).
- The speaker is at a funeral and is observing and pondering on what he sees.
- It evokes sadness and sorrow.
- It suggests the theme, mood and tone of the poem.
- The by-line 'for Valencia Majombozi' further explains what the poem is about.

Stanza 1

- Lines 1 - 2

The colours of the attire of the academics
who have attended the funeral

Black, green and gold at sunset: pageantry

The colours of the flags of the resistance
movement groups: ANC, PAC, SASCO, etc.

Allusion

The splendid, beautiful arrangements
of the send-off

And stubbled graves: expectant, of eternity,

Metaphor. What are
compared to *stubbles*?

The graves are always ready
to receive those who die.

How is this
word
significant?

Stanza 1 (continue)

- Lines 3 – 4

In bride's – white, nun's –white veils the nurses gush their bounty
Of red-wine cloaks,

The nurses who are at the funeral are wearing white uniform and red veils. Metaphorically, the nurses' uniform are as white as a bride's wedding gown or the nuns' white dresses. Their veils are red like red wine.

Stanza 1 (continue)

- Lines 4 – 5

This continues the image of the nurses' cloaks looking like red wine. How is this word significant? What is the figure of speech used here?

Metaphor.
Can you explain this?

... frothing the bugled dirging slopes

Salute!

A musical instrument. It is used in brass bands. How is this significant here?

What is the tone here? How is this word significant?

Stanza 1 (continue)

- Lines 5 – 6

Who is addressed here? What is the tone of the speaker here?

... Then ponder all this hollow panoply

For one whose gifts the mud devours, with our hopes.

To what does this refer? What does the speaker think of all that has been arranged?

To what does this refer?
Give synonyms for gifts

Allusion. To what does this refer?

Consider the saying: It takes a village to raise a child. How is this word significant?

Stanza 2

- Lines 7

Who is referred to?
What is the tone here?

So there are many other
people who have died
untimely!

Oh all you frustrate ones, powers tombed in dirt,
Aborted,

Stanza 2

- Line 8

Personification

... not be Death but carrion books of birth

This refers to the pass book (ID) that black people had to carry from the age of 16 years.

Stanza 2 (continue)

- Line 9 - 10

Arise! ...

Who is
addressed? What
is the tone?

Is freedom
personified?

The brassy shout of Freedom stirs our earth;
Not Death but death's head tyranny scythes our ground

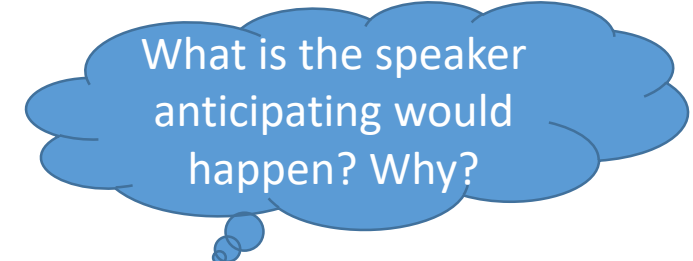
Allusion. The apartheid government is compared to the Nazi Germany troops of Hitler. What are the similarities hinted at here?

Stanza 2 (continue)

- Lines 11

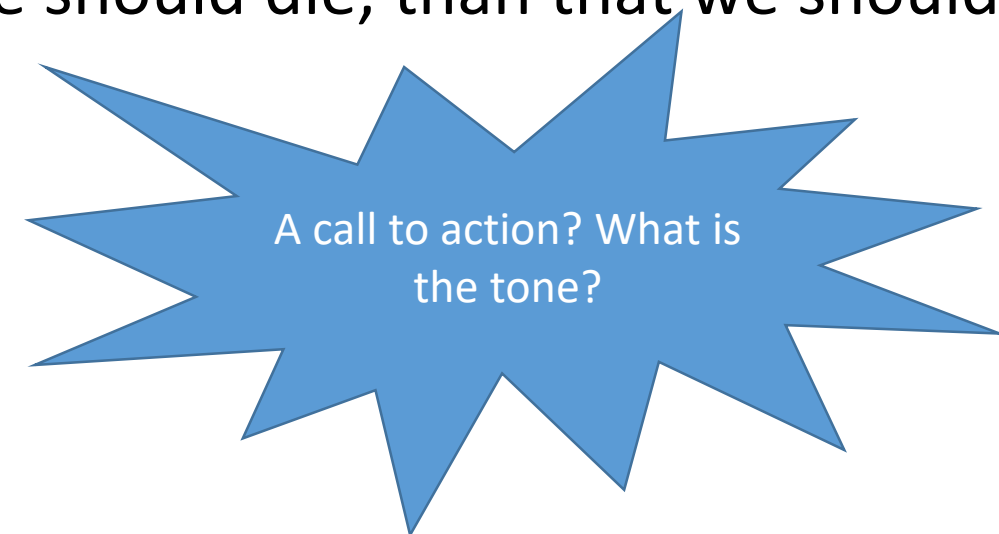


Is this a pun?



What is the speaker anticipating would happen? Why?

And plots our narrow cells of pain defeat and dearth
Better that we should die, than that we should lie down.



A call to action? What is the tone?