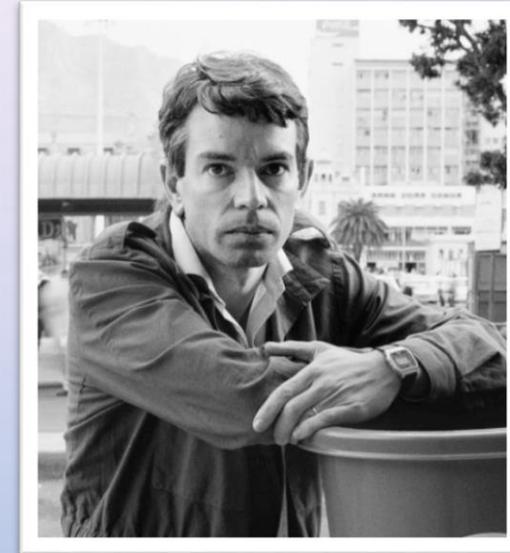


MOTHO KE MOTHO KA BATHO BABANG

(A PERSON IS A PERSON BECAUSE OF OTHER PEOPLE)

JEREMY CRONIN



THEME

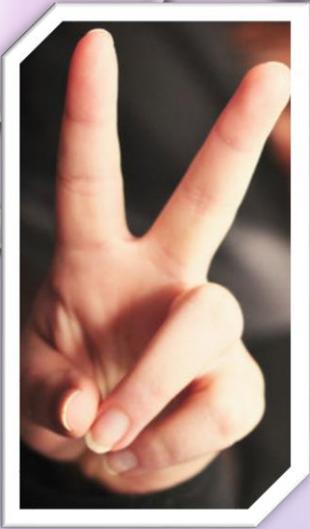
- **“*Motho Ke Motho Ka Batho Babang*” details a communication between two prisoners who can see each other only in the reflection of one handheld mirror.**
- **This is an apt metaphor for how difficult it is to look at any life except indirectly.**
- **The poem’s title references a common African concept: *ubuntu*, a belief in a healthy community as central to society.**
- **Culturally the individual is not as crucial as the whole of the community.**

**MOTHO KE MOTHO KA BATHO BABANG
(A Person is a Person Because of Other People)**

**By holding my mirror out of the window I see
Clear to the end of the passage
There's a person down there.
A prisoner polishing a door handle.
In the mirror I see him see
My face in the mirror,
I see the fingertips of his free hand
Bunch together, as if to make
An object the size of a badge
Which travels up to his forehead
The place of an imaginary cap.**

(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.)

Hey! Wat maak jy daar?

– a voice from around the corner.

No. Just polishing baas.

**He turns his back to me, now watch
His free hand, the talkative one,
Slips quietly behind**

– Strength brother, it says,

In my mirror,

A black fist.

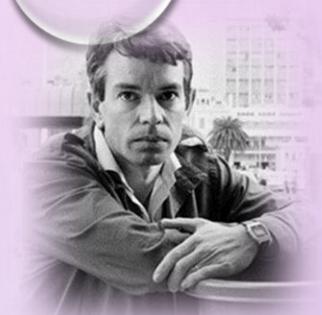


JEREMY CRONIN



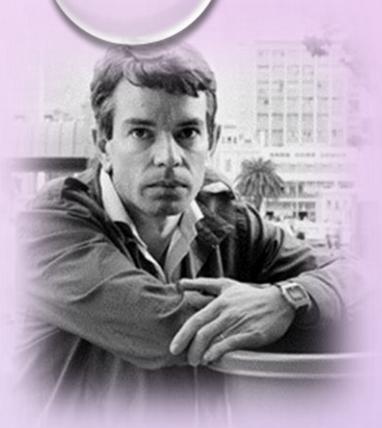
- **Born 12 september 1949 he is a South African writer, author, and noted poet.**
- **A long-time activist in politics, cronin is a member of the south african communist party and a member of the national executive committee of the african national congress.**
- **He presently serves as the south african deputy minister of public works.**
- **Cronin was brought up in a middle-class white Roman Catholic family in Rondebosch.**
- **During adolescence he considered the idea of entering the priesthood.**

JEREMY CRONIN



- In 1968 Cronin won a bursary to study at the University of Cape Town, where he became a member of the radical student society and was subsequently recruited into the (banned) South African Communist Party (SACP).
- In the early 1970s, Cronin studied his masters in philosophy in France and returned to South Africa, where he began lecturing in the philosophy department of the University of Cape Town.
- Cronin's work in the propaganda unit of the SACP brought him to the attention of the South African Bureau of State Security
- He was arrested on charges under the Terrorism and Internal Security Acts and tried in the Cape Town Supreme Court in September 1976.

JEREMY CRONIN



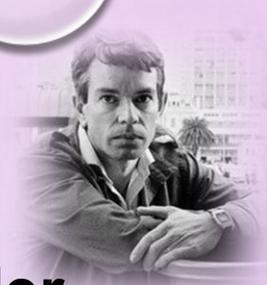
- **The charges included conspiring with members of the African National Congress (also a banned organisation) and the SACP,**
- **Also for preparing and distributing pamphlets on these organisations' behalf.**
- **Cronin pleaded guilty to all charges and was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment (1976–1983), which he served in Pretoria.**
- **His wife, Anne Marie, died of a brain tumour during his imprisonment.**

SUMMARY:

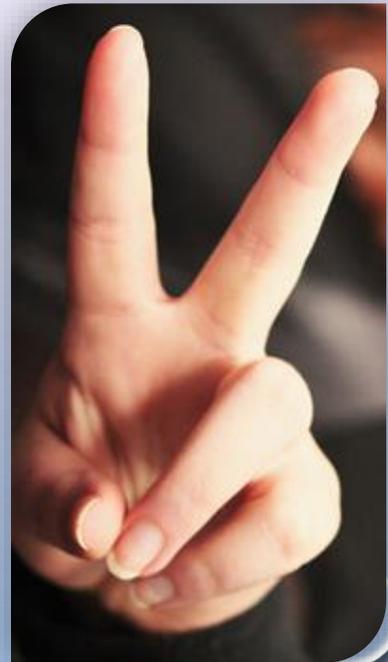


- **This is a narrative poem that tells of an encounter between two prisoners.**
 - **One is in a cell, we can presume that it may be solitary confinement as this was usual for political prisoners since this restricted the amount of contact between them and the general prison population.**
 - **The other is a prisoner who is cleaning the prison. At the time of the interaction he is actually polishing a door handle.**
- **A warden is present, though out of sight.**
- **The prisoner in the cell is able to see what is happening by putting a mirror through the window of his cell door and watching the other man.**

SUMMARY:



- They “talk” by using signs that are not noticed by the watching warder.
- Their “conversation” is interrupted by the warden who asks what is going on.
- Before leaving the working prisoner encourages the other to have “strength” in the situation he finds himself in.
- The main point of the poem is that as an isolated prisoner he has no contact with others and is ignored and dehumanised, this can be very demoralising.
- By being recognised by another human his “humanity” is validated and this seemingly trivial interaction takes on a very different meaning.



Highlighting the fact that interpersonal contact was not allowed and the only way to communicate is through "intermediary"

Again always an obstruction between people. This emphasises the isolation and the lack of human contact.

Is clarity possible considering the barriers to communication. Could be using "clear" in a colloquial way.

By holding my **mirror** out of the **window** I see
Clear to the end of the passage

There's a **person** down there.

A **prisoner** polishing a door handle.

In the mirror I see him see
My face in the mirror,

I see the fingertips of his free hand

Bunch together, as if to make

An object the size of a badge

Which travels up to his forehead

The place of an imaginary cap.

(This means: A **warder.)**

No name given but described as a "human" first and a "prisoner" second.

Description of the conversation

The do not see one another face to face but through reflections in the mirror.

Prison guard

Brackets used to supply extra information (translation)



**Two fingers are extended in a vee
And wiggle like two antennae.**

*Describing
conversation*

(He's being watched.)

Translation

**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.**

*There is no need to hurry. The
repetition of "slow" more of
a colloquialism than anything
else*



Translation

What are you doing?

(Later. Maybe, later we can speak.)

Hey! Wat maak jy daar?

The question is what kind of conversation would this be? Verbal or sign?

-- a voice from around the corner.

Spoken response, and the use of title when addressing the warder. (Lying to authority)

No. Just polishing baas.

He turns his back to me, now watch

Unseen voice only those "in power" are given a voice?

His free hand, the talkative one,

Slips quietly behind

– Strength brother, it says,

Not listen, ties in with the context of the poem. Extending an invitation to the reader to be part of the conversation and subterfuge.

The hand seen as an entity of its own. The message of support and hope.

In my mirror,

A black fist.

Universal sign of black power and opposition to oppression.

UNDERSTANDING THE POEM

- 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.**

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.
- 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.

SOUND DEVICES

- **It could be considered ironic that although this is a poem without formal ‘sound devices’, it is centred on sound and the lack of it. Cronin refers to a ‘*talkative*’ (line 24) hand which, of course, is completely silent.**
- **The poem is commenting on sound by emphasising its absence.**

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Provide an explanation for the prisoner's use of the mirror.

The mirror allows the prisoner to see and receive communication beyond the restricted vision of the cell's confines.

2. Find evidence in the poem that prisoners are kept occupied with time-wasting chores.

A prisoner is busy 'polishing a door handle' (line 4), which is hardly a crucial task.

3. Explain the link between an 'imaginary cap' (line 11) and a guard.

The signal of bunched fingers to the forehead, miming a badge on an 'imaginary cap' (line 11), is visual 'shorthand' to indicate the presence of a guard.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

4. Discuss Cronin's use of different languages in the poem.

Cronin uses conventional language to communicate with the reader. The poem incorporates a description of the sign language used by prisoners to communicate silently to one another, with the explanations of the visual gestures being interpreted in parenthesis. The guard's authoritative demand in Afrikaans and the submissive spoken response are indicated by the use of italics. Thus, this unnatural spoken response are indicated by the use of italics. This unnatural world is conveyed through the use of various communication tools.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

5. The poem is written in an informal style. How does the style contribute to the meaning of the poem?

The informal, colloquial register of the narrative makes the poem seem like the speaker is speaking directly to the reader; the direct speech captures the speech patterns used and so makes the exchange authentic and convincing.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

- 6. This poem illustrates truths about the human condition. Explore how the poem shows the cruelty of isolation as a form of punishment, and why it was a favoured treatment of political prisoners.**

The human need for communication with fellow beings is demonstrated in the poem as prisoners would risk the wrath and punishment of breaking the rules just to have some contact with one another. This demonstrates just how cruel, unnatural and difficult it must be to endure the deprivation of the isolated prisoner. This form of punishment is favoured for political prisoners as it would prohibit the 'subversive' ideas that such prisoners would want to spread.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

7. **Assess whether the poem is an appropriate demonstration of the concept of *ubuntu*.**

The poem is an excellent demonstration of the concept of *ubuntu* as we see how the isolated prisoner only feels fully human through the connection with another. The fellow prisoner is also aware of this and is prepared to risk unpleasant consequences for his defiance in reaching out to a fellow prisoner.

QUESTIONS:

- 1. How does the title reflect the message of the poem? (6)**
- 2. Discuss how the poet creates a sense of alienation and isolation in the poem. substantiate your answer from the text. (4)**
- 3. Is the use of colloquial language in this poem effective? Give a reason for your answer. (2)**
- 4. How does the poet include the reader near the end of the poem? (2)**
- 5. Discuss why this poem may be both humanist and subversive at the same time? (4)**
- 6. What is the tone of this poem? give a reason for your response. (2)**