

**Tatamkhulu Afrika: Nothing's Changed**

**Context**

This is an autobiographical poem. Tatamkhulu Afrika (1920-2002) lived in Cape Town's District 6, which was then a thriving mixed-race inner-city community. People of all colours and beliefs lived together peacefully, and Afrika said he felt 'at home' there.

In the 1960s, as part of its policy of apartheid the government declared District 6 a 'whites-only' area, and began to evacuate the population. Over a period of years, the entire area was razed to the ground. Most of it has never been built on.

The poem was written just after the official end of apartheid. It was a time of hope - Nelson Mandela had recently been released from prison, and the ANC was about to form the government of South Africa.

Tatamkhulu Afrika's life story is complicated, but knowing something about it will help you to understand the feelings expressed in this poem.

**Tatamkhulu Afrika's life**

Tatamkhulu Afrika was brought up in Cape Town, South Africa, as a white South African.

When he was a teenager, he found out that he was actually Egyptian-born - the child of an Arab father and a Turkish mother.

The South African government began to classify every citizen by colour - white, black and coloured. Afrika turned down the chance to be classed as white, and chose instead to become a Muslim and be classified as coloured.

In 1984, the poet joined the ANC (the African National Congress - the organisation leading the struggle against apartheid). Arrested in 1987 for terrorism, he was banned from writing or speaking in public for five years. At this point, he adopted the name - Tatamkhulu Afrika - which had previously been his ANC code name. This enabled him to carry on writing, despite the ban.

Of his own sense of identity, the poet said: "I am completely African. I am a citizen of Africa; I'm a son of Africa - that is my culture. I know I

(with acknowledgements to BBC Bitesize)
write poems that sound European, because I was brought up in school to
do that, but, if you look at my poems carefully, you will find that all of
them, I think, have an African flavour."

Small round hard stones click
under my heels,
seeding grasses thrust
bearded seeds
into trouser cuffs, cans,
trodden on, crunch
in tall, purple-flowering,
amiable weeds.

District Six.
No board says it is:
but my feet know,
and my hands,
and the skin about my bones,
and the soft labouring of my lungs,
and the hot, white, inwards turning
anger of my eyes.

Brash with glass,
name flaring like a flag,
it squats
in the grass and weeds,
incipient Port Jackson trees:
new, up-market, haute cuisine,
guard at the gatepost,
whites only inn.

No sign says it is:
but we know where we belong.

I press my nose
to the clear panes, know,
before I see them, there will be
crushed ice white glass,
linen falls,
the single rose.

(with acknowledgements to BBC Bitesize)
Down the road,
working man’s cafe sells
bunny chows.
Take it with you, eat
it at a plastic table’s top,
wipe your fingers on your jeans,
spit a little on the floor:
it’s in the bone.

I back from the glass,
boy again,
leaving small mean O
of small mean mouth.
Hands burn
for a stone, a bomb,
to shiver down the glass.
Nothing’s changed.

**Vocabulary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Port Jackson trees</td>
<td>Trees imported from Australia.</td>
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<tr>
<td>bunny chow</td>
<td>Bread stuffed with pilchards or similar - a poor man's hamburger.</td>
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**What is Nothing's Changed about?**

(Picture courtesy of Shane Thomas)

The poet returns to the wasteland that was once his home, and relives the anger he felt when the area was first destroyed.

(Picture courtesy of Janet Brown)

He sees a new restaurant: expensive, stylish, exclusive, with a guard at the gatepost.

(with acknowledgements to BBC Bitesize)
He thinks about the poverty around it, especially the working man’s café nearby, where people eat without plates from a plastic tabletop.

Inequalities between blacks and whites

This makes him reflect that despite the changing political situation, there are still huge inequalities between blacks and whites. Even though South Africa is supposed to have changed, he knows the new restaurant is really ‘whites-only’. He feels that nothing has really changed.

The deep anger he feels makes him want to destroy the restaurant - to smash the glass with a stone, or a bomb.

Structure

On the page, the poem is set out in six stanzas, each of eight fairly short lines. This kind of regularity in the layout creates a sense of control: the poet is very clear about what he is feeling - not suddenly flying into a rage.

But within that pattern, the length of the sentences varies from a whole stanza to just two words. To explore the effect of the sentence structure in the poem, look at this example:

(with acknowledgements to BBC Bitesize)
District Six.
No board says it is:
but my feet know,
and my hands,
and the skin about my bones,
and the soft labouring of my lungs,
and the hot, white, inwards turning
anger of my eyes

Language

The whole poem is written in the present tense. Although he is recalling a past experience, it is as if the poet is re-living the experience as he writes. This is one of the things that makes this poem vivid to read, and easy to identify with.

The viewpoint in the poem is carefully established. The first stanza, for example, puts us 'in the poet's shoes'. It is as if we are walking with the poet across the rough ground. As the poem develops, it is easy to imagine where we are walking or standing, and what we see:

I press my nose to the clear panes:

This also makes it more likely that we will see things from his 'point of view'

I back from the glass,
boy again,
leaving small mean O
of small mean mouth.
Hands burn
for a stone, a bomb,
to shiver down the glass.

(with acknowledgements to BBC Bitesize)
**Imagery**

We can imagine how his hands 'burn' to take revenge. It is a physical image - one we can almost feel ourselves.

The images in the poem - of the wasteland itself, the expensive restaurant, and the working man’s cafe - are sharply contrasted. Which two images seem to you to highlight most strongly the inequalities that the poet observes?

**Sound**

- Stanza 1 consists of a single sentence in which almost each word is stressed. It follows the poet as he ventures onto the wasteland, step by step on the hard, unfriendly ground. Try reading it aloud to see what kind of rhythm it produces. Is the effect heavy, perhaps plodding? Or is it lighter and quicker? Make up your mind about this.

- Now compare that with stanza 2. Look at the effect of the build up of repeated 'ands' in this stanza? What happens to the length of the lines here? Which words do you stress as you read this stanza?

- Stanza 3 is another long sentence. Notice how the subject of the stanza isn’t actually mentioned until the end. What effect does that have?

You’ll find two very short sentences in this poem - look at line 9 and line 48. What effect do these short, sharp sentences produce?

**Attitude, tone and ideas**

Much of the meaning of a poem is conveyed by the attitude it expresses toward its subject matter. Attitude can be thought of as a combination

(Picture courtesy of Julian Lynch)

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of the poet's tone of voice, and the ideas he or she is trying to get across to the reader.

A good way to decide on the tone of a poem is to work out how you would read it aloud. Should this poem be read:

- Angrily, to show the poet's attitude to the fact that nothing has changed?
- Or in a resigned way, as if he knows that it's almost too much to hope that things can change?

Select a short quotation to justify your choice.

Tatamkhulu Afrika wrote this about his poem:

'Nothing's Changed is entirely autobiographical. I can't quite remember when I wrote this, but I think it must have been about 1990. District Six was a complete waste by then, and I hadn't been passing through it for a long time. But nothing has changed. Not only District Six... I mean, we may have a new constitution, we may have on the face of it a beautiful democracy, but the racism in this country is absolutely redolent. We try to pretend to the world that it does not exist, but it most certainly does, all day long, every day, shocking and saddening and terrible.

Look, I don't want to sound like a prophet of doom, because I don't feel like that at all. I am full of hope. But I won't see it in my lifetime. It's going to take a long time. I mean, in America it's taken all this time and it's still not gone... So it will change. But not quickly, not quickly at all.'

(with acknowledgements to BBC Bitesize)