

The simplicity with
which brutus speaks
is what makes his
voice so powerful

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Dennis Brutus is an internationally known poet whose poems centre on his sufferings and those of his fellow blacks in South Africa under apartheid. His outspoken protests against apartheid led to an 18-month prison term on Robben Island. He has written many poems regarding his imprisonment and the horrors of the regime in South Africa. Brutus exhibits a restrained artistic control when writing his poems, which record his experiences of misery and loneliness as a political prisoner. His language and versification are simple and direct. If anything, the hardship and suffering are understated with the result that the experiences described are conveyed with even greater force. The natural elements and symbolism used by Brutus assists him in writing his poems. Using such pleasant descriptive features to describe the violence, gives it even more impact.

" Cold" is a short and compact poem with the title itself referring to a form of discomfort felt by Brutus whilst being imprisoned. The opening lines of the poem convey more of the distress experienced by Brutus.

" The clammy cement

sucks our naked feet"

The sensory description of the cement sucking up the moisture from their 'naked feet' seems as if life itself is being extracted from the individuals. His choice of words is extremely effective as he uses 'naked' rather than bare. This implying that they were deprived of their human rights and dehumanised. With the additional description regarding the surroundings and actions of the prisoners, 'the stubbled grass wet with three o' clock dew,'

- 'stuff with our fingers the sugarless pap into our mouths,' the situation concerning the prisoners appears to become more dismal.

The fact that they 'stuffed' the food into their mouth conveys that they were given a limited amount of time to eat it; furthermore, they had been deprived of their food since then. Additionally, the 'three o' clock dew' signifies the early hours in which they had to wake for their long journey allowing the reader to understand the harshness of their regime. Throughout the poem, an impression of the surroundings is gained to be nondescript due to the insipid colours used to describe the surroundings. The 'rheumy yellow bulb' that 'lights a damp grey wall' gives the notion of everything being weak and the prisoners being in impoverish conditions.

Brutus does not state any of his emotions, whether they are of anger, anguish or sorrow - it is left to the reader to interpret the graveness of the conditions. Brutus simply writes the state of affairs he is in, however, it is only until the closing stages of the poem does Brutus mention the fact that his ankles and wrists are chained. One wonders why such a significant factor is stated at the end of the poem rather than the beginning of it. It shows to a certain extent that Brutus does not want to gain sympathy from the reader seeing that otherwise he would have said this earlier, alongside elaborating on the other factors of discomfort and deprivation that he has previously cited. It is only after the reader realises that the prisoners are chained do they clearly perceive the full picture.

The fact that the prisoners are made to walk with 'naked feet', at three o'clock in the morning, is barely comprehensible. However, when one realises that their ankles and wrists are chained, the sympathy for the prisoners intensifies. The poem finishes with words of understatement as Brutus states, 'we begin to move awkwardly.' He is understating the difficulty and pain felt by himself and the prisoners. It can be seen again that Brutus does not care to gain sympathy from the reader and so minimizes the actual torture and misery he and his inmates feel.

Brutus does not need to elaborate on the extent of his discomfort. He merely states the situation he is in, in the simplest of terms and seemingly disregards it and imparts to a different topic discarding all emotions. Felt on the previous topic. However academics speaking in language, every reader understands the content of the poem - It is concise and to the point. There are a number of essential opponents that make the poem so powerful. The overall depth of the poem is conceived by the simplicity.

Alongside the themes of discomfort and imprisonment that are conveyed from Brutus' poems, the reader also gains the impression of how the poet accepts the situation in hand without giving in. Brutus acknowledges the circumstances he is in and does what he can to think of the experience in prison as beneficial as can be for him. He is aware of the fact that there is no point in resisting the regime and subsequently has to come to terms with the conditions.

In '10', an ever-present optimistic view is taken to the lifestyle owed to his imprisonment, unlike 'Cold' where the reader can deeply sense the deprivation. The structure of the two poems is similar as there is neither rhythm nor rhyme in the irregular numbered verses, each containing independent actions. In '10,' Brutus accentuates certain things, which he is grateful for. However, it has to be taken into account that the poem is a letter to a family member (Martha) therefore he may have been not telling the entire truth of the situation as wanting to assure the recipient that it was 'not all terror and deprivation.'

The poet states how he comes to 'welcome the closer contact and understanding one achieves with one's fellow-men, fellows, compeers;' One cannot help but observe the repetition of the word 'fellow.' It seems as if Brutus is trying to emphasise that the prisoners are all equals and share the same aims. They gain understanding and comfort from each other due to the fact that they are in the same situation.

Furthermore, Brutus states how the 'discipline does much to force a shape and pattern on one's daily life as well as on the days.' The regime of the prison is his purpose to cling onto life, as he does not want the days to merge into night. Such things as the time of rising, lights out and meal times give the days 'shape' and regularity - a ritual of existence. By looking at things from a certain point of view, Brutus turns things to his own advantage. He refers to hard labour as 'honest toil' that 'offers some redeeming hours for the wasted years,' making life worthwhile. He does not regard the hard

labour as torment or agony; instead, he refers to it as if it is something that he enjoys.

The way in which Brutus accepts the situation without giving in, allows him to cope with the humiliation and pressures of prison. The strength of mind and the importance of positive thinking is vital when living in such circumstances where he and the prisoners are referred to, by the wardens, with derogatory terms such as 'rats.' In 'Cold' Brutus states how he and the prisoners, 'steel' themselves 'into fortitude' signifying to a certain extent that they have the physical and mental capacity to survive whatever they are up against and tolerate everything forced onto them for good to prevail.

'Savouring to the full its bitterness and seeking to escape nothing,' the prisoners can only find it deep within themselves to find something that keeps intact their mental health and refreshes them of the enmity.

Throughout the poems, Brutus refers to nature when, escaping from the 'hostile' sanctums of the prison. He compares his mind, when 'bright and restful' to the, 'full calm morning sea.' Even though the sea is something that he cannot observe, it does not prevent him from thinking about it - A good time for a fresh start.

Several references to the sky are also made - 'the mind turns upwards when it can.' Rather than looking down and being dispirited, Brutus looks up toward the sky and remains hopeful despite the situation he is in. This is oxymoronic due to the fact that the situation is hopeless yet Brutus still has hope in his mind and heart to overcome the hostility of the prison.

He values the simple things of life whilst looking out of the confines of the prison such as the stars. The stars are something beyond his worldly situation, which signify hopes and dreams. When Brutus refers to the 'Southern Cross flowering low' in 'Cold', he may have been implying that the two countering religions were in close proximity to fusion as the Southern Cross represents a unifying religious movement. Even though, 'the arcs and fluorescents' block the stars out, the Southern Cross is still visible to Brutus, due to its bright intensity.

The sky, stars and the birds aid Brutus add to the impact of the poetry. Their connection to his family, however slender, assists him in surviving. He contemplates whether the clouds that he is observing are being 'seen by those at home.' Such trivial matters of one's daily life seem so significant to the one of Brutus whose imprisonment makes him value and fantasise what one may take for granted, such as the 'complex aeronautics of the birds.' Brutus uses his mind to escape from the sanctums of the prison and interact with his family.

In the poem, 'For a Dead African' Dennis Brutus does not use his mind to escape and fantasise of the upcoming events, but states these things with such assurance that one gains the impression that there is nothing that can stop it from occurring and will so in the near future. The simplicity in the poem, 'For A Dead African,' is what makes it so powerful. The poem has a conventional rhythm and rhyme with the first and third lines of each verse rhyming with each other. The content of the poem is deeper than the others and the sombre title signifies this.

The first two verses illustrate the negative aspects of the continuous struggle against apartheid, which is unusual as Brutus generally holds an optimistic view toward his imprisonment. Nevertheless, here he talks of the 'victims of a sickly state,' signifying the fact that South Africa was not presided over by a government that was conclusive. Brutus also uses natural imagery to illustrate the beatings and punishments, which were experienced by the Africans.

'succumbing to the variegated sores

that flower under lashing rains of hate.'

It is interesting the way in which Brutus uses such pleasant descriptive features to exemplify the hatred. 'Lashing,' signifying the heavy downpour of hatred upon the Africans, resulting in 'variegated sores' to appear.

The second verse of the poem does not state the true adversity, when it states the 'accidental dyings in the dark.' Of course, they did not occur on 'eyeless nights' nor were they 'accidental' but they were just put down to it, as people did not want to protest. Again the reader sees the understatement presented by Brutus.

However, it is the last verse of 'For A Dead African,' that truly represents the talent of Brutus. The optimism from the last verse excels, alongside the ability Brutus possesses of conceiving the depth of the message. It can be seen that Brutus believes strongly in his theme of having to endure the pain for there to be anything commendable resulting from it. Brutus believes that

they will be freed from the tyranny and that the 'nameless unarmed ones will stand beside the warriors who secured the final prize.' Everybody will have contributed to the freeing of their land.

The certainty Brutus holds of predicting this to occur is what makes his voice so powerful. Simply stating actions or descriptions with neither doubt nor contradiction is what makes his poems prevailing. Brutus has the talent of making the reader see and believe what he himself sees and believes doing this, just through the power of words. When Brutus refers to the 'walls of bleak hostility,' it is a curt comment describing the austere conditions of the prison. However, with these words and the force applied to them, the reader cannot refrain from sympathising with the prisoner due to the conditions he is in.

Even though one would think that the tone used in Brutus' poems would be subjective, the majority of the time it is objective. He simply states the state of affairs and leaves the rest up to the reader to infer. Brutus does not emphasise certain things nor does he look for the reader's sympathy and condolences. Conclusively I think it is Brutus' ability to speak in such simplistic terms with such assurance and confirmation of the events taking place and subsequently to take place in the near future, is what makes his voice so powerful.