

OF FLIGHT

The theory

The Complete Guide and Resource

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And her courage was true freedom.*



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The Theory of Flight

THE COMPLETE GUIDE AND RESOURCE FOR GRADE 12

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All references made to the novel in this resource and the companion disc,
refer to the Penguin Random House edition of the novel (ISBN 978-1-4152-0942-4)

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Foreword

About The English Experience

The English Experience is an independent South African publishing house that specialises in developing high-quality English and Life Orientation educational resources for IEB educators and students. The team of passionate, talented experts behind The English Experience works tirelessly to ensure that every resource encourages insight, growth and debate – enriching and challenging both educators and students – without losing sight of the important goals of academic success and examination readiness.

Focused on bringing the subject to life, every resource The English Experience publishes incorporates a range of features – including content and contextual questions and stimulating enrichment materials – designed to encourage a critical appreciation of the subject and to inspire the higher-order thinking for which examiners are always looking.

The world-class English Experience team includes highly experienced educators, some with over 20 years of classroom experience, passionate literary experts in various fields like South African fiction, poetry and Shakespeare, fanatical historians and researchers, creative writers, skilled editors, pernickety proofreaders and obsessive fact checkers — together with spirited university lecturers and enthusiastic young minds who help ensure our approach remains unique and fresh.

While academic success is a non-negotiable consideration, our aspiration is to inspire a genuine interest in, and love of, English literature.

*'One must always be careful of books,
and what is inside them,
for words have the power to change us.'*

- CASSANDRA CLARE -



Visit www.englishexperience.co.za to learn more about The English Experience and the range of educational resources the company publishes. You can scan this QR code using the camera on your device or phone to launch the site automatically. Please note that you may need to have a 'tag reader' app installed. There are free versions of these apps available, which you can download from the app store on your device.

Our approach

Perhaps the toughest challenge with teaching literature to modern students is convincing them that the extra effort required in reading a novel – compared with the passive immediacy of movies and TV shows – is worth it. Decoding the language and bringing the text to life in the imagination can be taxing for young adults so it is perhaps not surprising that many of them see novels as works through which they must slog to earn marks or pass an examination.

This resource has been written with this reality in mind. Even though the language, themes and settings of the novel are likely to be easily accessible to Grade 12 students, particular attention has been paid to providing the kind of context and insight necessary to help them empathise fully with the characters and their struggles.



Reading a written description of a person, event or place encourages us to use our imaginations as we picture everything in our minds, unlike watching a movie or TV show, which creates these images for us on the screen. Ultimately, we are only limited by what we can imagine.

We passionately believe that studying literature rewards us with a broader, deeper understanding of ourselves and those around us. Our experience of this understanding is why this resource does more than provide students with a comprehensive, detailed analysis of the text. It also encourages them to engage with the novel on a personal level and to uncover their own responses through the extensive chapter-specific questions, enrichment tasks and essay topics.

Throughout this resource, students are challenged to agree or disagree with both the characters and events in the novel and the analysis that has been suggested. By formulating and expressing their own responses to the opinions, ideas and themes explored in the novel, students are encouraged to reflect and grow as individuals, as well as learners.

Ultimately, we have approached *The Theory of Flight* the same way we approach every text: with two interrelated goals in mind. Our first, non-negotiable objective is to ensure examination readiness and academic success. Our second ambition is to inspire a genuine interest in, and appreciation of, the work being studied.

Using this resource

This comprehensive resource includes: an extensive introduction to the author, the novel and its context; detailed summaries; rich literary analyses; diverse, chapter-specific short questions; challenging essay questions; and stimulating enrichment tasks – in short, everything needed to study the novel intensively and bring it to life.

Preparing with the right mindset

We recommend working through the **Background to the novel** section first so that students become familiar with the author and the context of the novel. This section starts with an introduction to the author so that students can gain an understanding of the experiences that helped shape the author's perspectives and inspire her to write the novel, together with her explanation of the issues she wished to explore and her interpretation of the novel.



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Next, a succinct discussion of the genre of magical realism and postcolonial literature is provided to help students situate the novel within its **Literary context**.

Since the characters in the novel are shaped by their experiences as citizens of an unnamed southern African nation (Zimbabwe) and its violent transition from colonialism to independence, a brief introduction to the **historical/geopolitical context**

of that era is provided to help students interpret the perspectives and motivations of the characters more completely.

The **Introduction to the novel** completes the preparatory section of this resource. It provides students with an initial overview and appreciation of the plot, characters and themes in the work, before they engage with the text itself.

By working through this comprehensive introductory section first, students will be prepared, engaged and able to read the novel with the right mindset.

Assimilating the novel methodically

Once students have been prepared and have read through the novel, the chapter-based summaries and analyses provided in the **Critical commentary** section ensure that a solid foundation of knowledge is laid.

Each chapter is summarised and analysed separately. Extensive glossaries are included, and students are required to engage with the content directly through chapter-specific questions. Students can then methodically build on this foundation, only dealing with the whole novel once they have worked through it step by step.

At the end of the summaries, there is also a series of enrichment tasks and a wide selection of rigorous essay topics, ensuring that students also tackle the novel in its entirety.

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Analysing the novel intensively

When students are familiar and comfortable with the novel, they can begin analysing the text more intensively and critically. The **Literary analysis** section includes detailed analyses of the plot, narration and structure, characters, themes, motifs and symbols in the work. It also highlights key quotations from the novel, with suggested interpretations.

Ensuring examination readiness and success

To ensure examination readiness and success, the resource also features an extensive section on the **Literary essay**. This section provides guidelines on writing literary essays, two annotated examples from which to learn, and a selection of essay topics. It also includes suggested further reading, a useful revision quiz and suggestions on how to prepare for an examination.



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What do you think?

We hope you enjoy using this resource as much as we enjoyed putting it together. If you have any comments, queries or suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact us by emailing info@englishexperience.co.za or calling our offices on (011) 786-6702.

Key to using the boxes in this resource:



Definition / Glossary

Provides the meanings of words and terms used in the text



Quirky Fact

Fun, interesting extraneous information



Information

Provides additional details or facts about a topic



Checklist

A list of items or activities required to complete a task satisfactorily



Alert

Something to which you need to pay attention



Quote

An interesting or important quotation from the novel

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Background to the novel

Author background

In *The Theory of Flight*, author Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu has created a heartfelt, joyous and uplifting novel that explores the notions of freedom, belonging, beauty and creativity against the backdrop of colonialism and the struggle for liberation, the weight of family history, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the relationship of people to the land upon which they live. In this section, we present a short biography of the author, followed by an interview with her in which she shares with us what inspired her to write the novel, the issues she wished to explore in the text and what she hopes students might gain from reading it.

Author biography



© Joanne Olivier

My name is Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu. I am a Zimbabwean writer, scholar, and filmmaker. My debut novel, *The Theory of Flight*, was published by Penguin Random House (SA) in 2018 and won the Sunday Times Barry Ronge Fiction Prize in 2019. The novel was also shortlisted for the University of Johannesburg Prizes for South African Writing in English in the Debut Prize category. It was published in North America by Catalyst Press in January 2021.

My second novel, *The History of Man*, was also published by Penguin Random House (SA) in October 2020 and will be published by Catalyst Press in 2022. It was recently shortlisted for The Sunday Times/CNA Fiction Prize. I was a recipient of a 2018 Morland Writing Scholarship, which I used to work on my third novel, *The Quality of Mercy*, which is currently under consideration for publication at both Penguin Random House (SA) and Catalyst Press. I was also a 2020 Writing Fellow at the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study (JIAS) where I worked on the first draft

of my fourth novel, *The Creation of the Half-Broken People*.

I hold a PhD in Modern Thought and Literature from Stanford University. My PhD dissertation was entitled, 'A Country with Land but no Habitat': *Travel and Belonging in Colonial Southern Rhodesia and Post-Colonial Zimbabwe*. While I was a PhD candidate my essay, "'Body" of Evidence: Saartjie Baartman and the Archive', was published in *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman* by Palgrave-MacMillan. I have an MA in African Studies and an MFA in Film from Ohio University. While I was a film student I made a short film, *Graffiti*, which won several awards including the Silver Dhow at the Zanzibar International Film Festival. I received my BFA in Writing, Literature and Publishing from Emerson College.



The following comments are edited extracts from an interview with Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu in April 2021 by Drew Shaw from the Centre for English Excellence, Bulawayo. These extracts are reproduced with permission. Scan the QR code alongside to read the full text of the interview.

On migrating

I was born in Bulawayo in Zimbabwe in 1977. I believe we lived there for a few months after I was born and then we had to go to Sweden. My grandparents were politically active and so we became political refugees. After living in Sweden for a year, my family moved to the United States and, after independence, probably at the end of 1980 or the beginning of 1981, we came back to Bulawayo.

Initially, we lived on a beautiful small-holding in a place called Rangemore in Bulawayo and it was there that I fell in love with sunflowers. My childhood in Rangemore informed many events in *The Theory of Flight*, especially those that take place on the Beauford Farm and Estate.

When I was 11, my mother and I moved to Hillside in Bulawayo, and I started attending Girls' College. After finishing high school, I went to university in the United States, and lived in the States for 18 years in total – in Boston, Massachusetts, and then in Athens, Ohio, and then in Palo Alto, California. Afterwards, I returned to the African continent and taught in South Africa for three years. In 2018, I decided to return to Bulawayo.



© Roberto Pavić (robfc1892 – Deviantart)

Initially, we lived on a beautiful small-holding in a place called Rangemore in Bulawayo and it was there that I fell in love with sunflowers. My childhood in Rangemore informed many events in The Theory of Flight, especially those that take place on the Beauford Farm and Estate.

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On writing

As a child, I was extremely fortunate to have stories all around me: my grandparents had a library that had a decent collection of children's books, the mobile library used to come to Rangemore regularly and my grandmother was a phenomenally gifted storyteller.

As a child, I was extremely fortunate to have stories all around me: my grandparents had a library that had a decent collection of children's books, the mobile library used to come to Rangemore regularly and my grandmother was a phenomenally gifted storyteller.

In school, my favourite task was writing compositions. When I was nine or 10 (to save the walls from my doodles), my mother bought me a very hefty scrapbook so that I could write down my ideas. I filled it with stick figures and each page had a different family and a different story to tell. This later helped with story boarding in film school.

Storytelling was such an integral part of my life that I wanted to be a writer from a young age. I thought that I would have to have a 'real' profession as well, though,

and so throughout high school I wanted to be a psychologist. When I was applying to college in the United States, however, I remember looking through the majors and realising that there was such a thing as creative writing in which you could major. Psychology became a forgotten dream in that instant and I went to the United States to major in creative writing. While I was doing that, I took a class in screenwriting and fell in love with that. So then I went to film school. I just really loved being creative. I still do. I love telling stories. So that is to what I have decided to dedicate my life.



© Pablo Picasso (WikiArt)

On magical realism

I think the reason I chose to use what people call 'magical realism' and to focalise the story through all these characters instead of one central character was because I was trying extremely hard to depict and showcase the diversity that exists around a person. You have all these different voices and different experiences clustering around a central thing – in this case, around Genie's life and death. I feel like most of the Zimbabwean fiction that I have read has not done much with diversity and different voices and experiences. And that really bothers me because it seems as if Zimbabwe is comfortable with segregation and with continuing to segregate voices and experiences within a work of fiction, and that, for me, was really limiting for the story that I was trying to tell.

It was also to capture that particular postcolonial moment, the late 80s and early 90s, in Zimbabwean history. There was this very thin line between what was real and what was fiction. I used to read the newspaper as a child and there were stories about this person called **'Jane the Ghost'**. She was seen as a prostitute who would suddenly disappear, leaving patrons abandoned and mystified – an example of the supernatural meeting the everyday. If you can read a story about a ghost in a national newspaper, that says a lot about the time and place in which you live. If you can believe or accept stories about the liberation struggle that make people seem like shapeshifters, or people who can disappear into thin air, then, for me, as a writer, part of my job is to capture all of that because that says something about the creativity of the moment. It says something about our imagination in that moment in time.

I used to read the newspaper as a child and there were stories about this person called 'Jane the Ghost'. She was seen as a prostitute who would suddenly disappear, leaving patrons abandoned and mystified – an example of the supernatural meeting the everyday.



'Jane the Ghost' is an urban legend that was popular in the Bulawayo area in the 80s and 90s. In the age of social media, the story has taken on a new life, with Twitter users retelling it in threads and even one young filmmaker, Lenni M Sibanda, making a short movie of it, which he published on YouTube. You can watch it by scanning the QR code below.

©Yvonne Maphosa



© Lenni M Sibanda



In *The Theory of Flight*, you have characters flying away and, yes, that is partly magical realism, but also, partly, for me, the realisation that, in this time and place, anything is possible. What I like about the 80s and 90s – at a time when we were still reeling from a civil war and we had a genocide and a pandemic with which to contend – is that people still had so much hope and were still willing to think beyond the limitations of the time and place in which they were living (although, not everyone obviously). For me, that sense of optimism and possibility was something that was brilliant. Perhaps because independence was so recent, people had this understanding of themselves as being capable of more than what was thought possible.

What I like about the 80s and 90s [...] is that people still had so much hope and were still willing to think beyond the limitations of the time and place in which they were living.

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For me, the flying in the novel is ultimately about having this deep and strong belief in yourself and what you are capable of.

It was important to me to capture that particularity and peculiarity of the 80s and 90s. I do like it that Genie is able to do a 'magical' thing and fly away. For me, the flying in the novel is ultimately about having this deep and strong belief in yourself and what you are capable of. This belief is something I think we do not get taught or encouraged to have in this country

because it is seen as posing a danger to the state. We are socialised to be dependent, not necessarily realising that we always have this power within us. And I think Genie is a person who realises that she has that power within her and can show people around her this absolute belief in the 'self'.

Also, part of what happens when the history of a country is filled with erasures and silences and omissions is that it then allows a space for what I suppose people call the magical to exist. You are not necessarily bound by what is seen as necessarily real or rational. You can still play with some of what came from the oral tradition and fables. You are not necessarily bound by the binary of 'this is what is real' and 'this is what is fiction'.

On the HIV/AIDS pandemic

As I have already mentioned, with *The Theory of Flight*, I was trying to capture the time and place in which I grew up, which was a time and place that was beset by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. At a certain point, the statistic was that one in four adults had HIV. For post-independence Zimbabwe, HIV/AIDS was something very real, very immediate and very frightening. And I wanted my first story to capture that.

I know that there are value judgments about African fiction and the idea that it is doom and gloom — that African literature is too political, is all about horrible things that happen. But how do you tell the story of this time and place without talking about the pandemic? HIV was, for my generation at least, one of the things that defined us. We had relatives who had it, some of us grew up to have it, we lived under its constant shadow; whether we acknowledged it or not; it shaped us in many ways. So, I did not want to tell a story that does not deal with HIV when it was such a very pivotal thing in all our lives.

For post-independence Zimbabwe, HIV/AIDS was something very real, very immediate and very frightening.



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On belonging

I do not like the idea of focusing on belonging on the land because that is very exclusive (some people belong, some people do not). What I think brings us all together is this idea of travel, that we all, for different reasons, are moving in and out or within the country. In a country where different ethnicities are seen as residing in particular places, to move from one place to another is as big a deal as actually crossing a border and going to another country.

When I look at Rhodesia/Zimbabwe's overall history, I see a lot of movement. Before the settlers came, there were the Matabele, my people, migrating and arriving because of what was happening in South Africa during the Mfecane period of political disruption and migration. The autochthonous people in Zimbabwe were the Khoisan. Everyone else has come in from elsewhere and settled here. We need to



© Jacob Lawrence (The Museum of Modern Art)

be honest about this. We can see from rock art, among other things, that the Khoisan moved around a good deal as well. So, for me, this idea of movement is actually what brings us together — it is the character of this country.

If we could build a sense of identity and belonging around a history of movement, it would be a more inclusive and sustainable way of thinking about the Zimbabwean ...

being Zimbabwean ... belonging to Zimbabwe — instead of saying, these people came and took the land, or these people came from over there and settled here, and so they don't really belong. That approach doesn't help the issue. I don't think it is meant to help the issue. I think it is meant to divide us.

So I really like the idea of thinking about the past 150 years, or however long it has been, through this idea of travel — and travel being this thing that encompasses many kinds of movement. We create a nation together, whether we like it or not. Our diversity is what is reflected back at us, but I don't think we've ever wanted to see that. We always focus on 'the land' because we do not want to see the diversity of who we are. Perhaps we find it too fraught to think of ourselves as a people who have come together from different places. But I think that is the way forward. So in my novel, I replicate that with all the people moving around the way they do.

If we could build a sense of identity and belonging around a history of movement, it would be a more inclusive and sustainable way of thinking about the Zimbabwean ... being Zimbabwean ... belonging to Zimbabwe.

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A soldier maintains order as hundreds of people gather at the gate of the Beitbridge border waiting to enter into South Africa following the announcement of the Zimbabwean lockdown (January 2021).

Author interview

Author Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu shares her thoughts and feelings on a wide range of topics related to the novel, including what inspired her to write it, the issues she wished to explore, her interpretation of the motivations of the main characters, what she believes the work suggests about its major themes, and the importance of getting to know yourself and holding on to yourself when influences like history, circumstances, other people, and the state try to shape and change you.

English Experience: What prompted or inspired you to write *The Theory of Flight*?

Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu: In 2007, my aunt, Sibongile Frieda Nkomo, passed away quite suddenly and unexpectedly. She was four years older than me, and we had always been very close – like sisters. Needless to say, I was devastated by her passing. When I attended her funeral and talked to family and friends, I realised that while we were all grieving the loss of the same person, we were remembering her differently because she had been someone different in all our lives – a daughter, a sister, a mother, a wife, an aunt, a cousin, a friend, a work mate.



© Joanne Olivier

It became clear to me in an immediate way that had not really been there before that, while an individual has a 'self', who that individual is, is made up not only of that 'self' but also of the other selves that that individual is in other people's lives. In other words, the self is something that is constantly being negotiated through the different relations that we have – it is not created in a vacuum.

The Theory of Flight was, therefore, prompted by my desire to understand what this idea of a negotiated self means for both loving someone and losing someone – who exactly are you loving and who exactly are you losing and what happens to that person's own sense of self in the process? The novel, of necessity, became an exploration of these ideas and questions and in the process, as we shall see in what follows, came to examine more than the self's relation to itself and its relation to others – it also came to examine the self's relation to the state.



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Who am I? Who are you?

Austrian artist Egon Schiele (pictured left) was one of the first visual artists to use his own face and body in a 'performative' way in his work. His large number of self-portrait drawings and paintings create a sense of a man never quite sure of his exact identity, and also of a person willing to play around with the idea of identity. Since then, a number of pop musicians have embraced the idea of the 'fluid identity': David Bowie (pictured centre) and Lady Gaga (pictured right) have both reinvented themselves a number of times.



© Egon Schiele



© mike-g-smith-art



© mike-g-smith-art

EE: How long did it take you to write the novel?

SGN: For me, a story begins its telling when the first character appears or when the first incident takes place in your imagination – writing is not just words on a page, writing is the entire process involved in getting those words on the page – so I often say it took me ten years to write the novel. I started seriously writing the novel – sustained paragraphs and chapters in a notebook – in 2010 and finished the first draft by the end of 2015. I then made revisions and submitted it to publishers in 2016. But, as I mentioned earlier, the idea for the story had germinated in 2007 and I would often jot down a character trait here, a sentence there, a line of dialogue somewhere else. It was difficult for me to see the entire story world because I was a PhD candidate at the time and had to dedicate most of my time to academic pursuits – but the story was always there at the back of my mind. As the story world became more vivid, the characters became more assertive, and I had to start dedicating more time to the actual writing of the story.

EE: What are the main themes you set out to address in the work?

SGN: *The Theory of Flight* addresses many themes: selfhood, love, loss, family, community, belonging, freedom, creativity and imagination being chief amongst them. These themes are examined within the context of a history beset by civil war, genocide and HIV/AIDS. What is the legacy of such a particularly violent and devastating history on our sense of self, on our ideas of belonging, on our ability to freely express ourselves? With so much loss how can we continue to love or create a sense of community?

The life of our protagonist, Imogen Zula Nyoni – Genie – is intimately touched by these three events – she is born during the civil war, is a survivor of the genocide and is HIV-positive. Who should she be in light of all of this? How should she relate to others around her? Should she let this violent history shape her or should she hold on to her own understanding of who she is beyond this history? ... Is there a self beyond what has been created by this history? Similar questions could be asked of all the characters in the novel because these histories have touched their lives as well. For some characters, these questions are complicated by their feelings of guilt, complicity, collusion and denial.



© Tawny Chatmon

Who should she be in light of all of this? How should she relate to others around her? Should she let this violent history shape her or should she hold on to her own understanding of who she is beyond this history? ... Is there a self beyond what has been created by this history?

EE: Why did you choose this subject matter for the novel?

SGN: I chose this subject matter because I find history and our relationship to it fascinating. What should we do with the legacies of the violent and unjust histories that we inherit? This is a pertinent question because the past in southern Africa is particularly brutal and cruel.

In Zimbabwe, the state/government makes every attempt to control narratives of the past through what historian Terence Ranger calls 'Patriotic History'. To this end, certain narratives, experiences and memories are either erased, silenced or omitted because they are deemed too dangerous. The danger here is often presented as something that might potentially be damaging to the nation, but really what would be damaged is the image of those in power. History then becomes not the memory of a common past that we all share in, but the product of power.

This occurrence is not unique to Zimbabwe. Most states, especially those with uncomfortable histories, attempt to control narratives of the past – and as I have already said the past in southern Africa is particularly unjust. So it is not only important, it is imperative, that we determine not only our relationship to the past but also to the impact that its legacy will have on our sense of self, on our ideas of belonging, on our ability to express ourselves freely.

EE: How did you decide on the title of the novel?

SGN: This is like the chicken and egg question for me. To be honest, I can no longer remember which came first, the title or the many instances of 'flight' in the novel. There is a play on the idea of 'flight' throughout the story: Baines, Genie's grandfather, has a wanderlust that makes him 'flighty'. He also has a love of aeroplanes that inspires his son, Livingstone/Golide, not only to draw sketches of planes and build wire models of planes but also eventually to build a giant pair of silver wings so that he can transport Elizabeth, the woman he loves, to Nashville, Tennessee to fulfil her desire to be a *bona fide* country-and-western singer. Golide and Elizabeth's daughter, our protagonist, Genie, 'takes flight'; that is, flees the Beauford Farm and Estate after the 'sojas' with the red berets come; she again 'takes off' when she leaves the Masukus' home and goes to save Jesus/Vida; eventually, she flies away on a



The cover for a report on the genocide in Zimbabwe carried out by then President Robert Mugabe, between 1983 and 1987. The massacre (called Gukurahundi) led to the deaths of as many as 20 000 people in the part of Zimbabwe called Matabeleland North Province. This was a way for Mugabe to secure power by silencing political opposition.

In this image, Mugabe's body morphs into a series of blood drips, symbolising his violent method of maintaining power.



© Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace

What should we do with the legacies of the violent and unjust histories that we inherit?

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giant pair of silver wings when she dies. Various characters, now living in the diaspora, fly in and out of the country via plane. The novel also treats 'flight' as a symbol and metaphor for liberation/ self-realisation/freedom.

'The Theory of' part of the title was not a little influenced by the fact that I was a PhD candidate at the time and immersed in theories of all kinds.



© Faith47.com

This artwork was created by South Africa street and mural artist Faith47, for a mural festival at the Dr Maya Angelou Community High School in Los Angeles in 2019.

EE: Why did you choose the particular narrative structure you did to tell the story?

SGN: There are several elements to the narrative structure of the novel and they all serve a purpose.

The Two Books

The story is divided into Book One and Book Two. Book One mostly delineates the past – both the personal and political histories that are part of our characters' lives – and Book Two explores the legacy of those histories on the lives of our cast of characters. To help emphasise the break between past and present, Book One is narrated mostly in the past tense – the only section not told in the past tense is the one titled 'The Present' – and Book Two is narrated in the present tense. In addition, Book One also deals with the circumstances that led to Genie's coma; Book Two deals with the consequences of Genie's coma.

The Parts

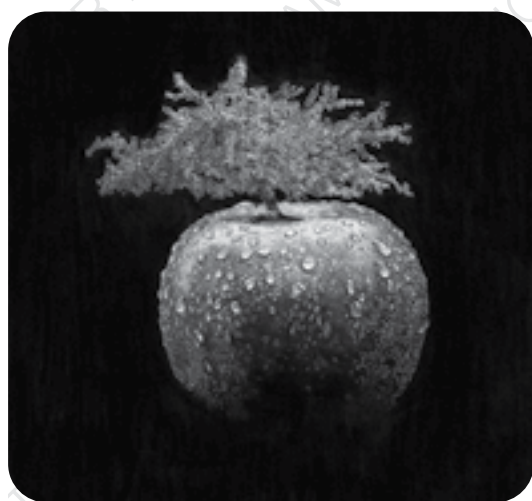
Book One and Book Two are further divided into several parts that deal with various ways of remembering, recording and explaining life. Book One has five parts: Genealogy, History, The Present, Teleology, Epidemiology. Book Two has two parts: Epistemology and Revelations. These parts emphasise the interconnected nature of our characters' stories and histories. As the Prologue states, '[I]ike any event, what happened to Genie did not happen in a vacuum: it was the result of a culmination of genealogies, histories, teleologies, epistemologies and epidemiologies – of ways of living, remembering, seeing, knowing and dying.' (p. 9)

The Multiple Perspectives

The story of each part is then told from a variety of perspectives. Although focused on Genie, the story is actually focalised through various characters who include: Golide Gumedé, her albino father who is a freedom fighter during the civil war; Vida de Villiers, also known as Jesus, her Coloured bisexual life-partner who lives a large part of his life as a street dweller; Valentine Tanaka, her disabled friend who is a dedicated civil-servant; Marcus and Krystle, members of the upper-middle-class Masuku family that adopted her and has Dingani and Thandi Masuku at the helm; the upper-class and white lifelong friends Beatrice Beit-Beauford and Kuki Carmichael who befriend Genie in the latter part of their lives; Jestina Nxumalo who works as a maid but later emigrates to Australia; Bhekithemba Nyathi, a reporter from a wealthy African family whose circumstances have been somewhat reduced; Dr Mambo, an HIV specialist; Goliath and the Survivors, a band of street kids who are a part of Vida's street life; the poor and disenfranchised war-veterans that have taken over the farm that belonged to Beatrice Beit-Beauford and, finally, Mr Mendelsohn, a Coloured undertaker made wealthy by the HIV/AIDS crisis. These multiple perspectives very intentionally, in turn, showcase the diversity in terms of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical ability and age of the characters who make up this story and, therefore, the people who make up this history.

Biblical Allusion: Genesis & Revelation

Another aspect of the narrative structure that I will briefly touch on is the fact that the first chapter of the novel is titled 'Genesis' and the last is titled 'Revelations' so there is a definite allusion to the Bible. I will leave it to the reader to make what they will of this.



Apple by Jono Dry (2014): Pencil drawing by a young South African artist of the apple from the garden of Eden in *The Book of Genesis*.



The Fall of Adam by Dustin Panzino (2012): This drawing made in pencil, ink, coffee and gesso explores the artist's vision of *The Book of Revelation*.

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EE: Why did you decide to incorporate a prologue?

SGN: The novel has thirty-two characters, which, in a novel in which the narrative is focalised through one or a few central characters, is not a problem, but, which, in a novel told via many different perspectives can be challenging for the reader. As I have already mentioned, the different characters' perspectives show us how histories – both personal and political – in this place are intertwined and interconnected; however, in the process of being interwoven, these histories often interrupt each other, as depicted in the first chapters of the novel, which can, therefore, make the beginning of the novel somewhat confusing and perhaps even difficult for the reader. The prologue – by telling us at its very beginning how the story ends, by making the importance of the idea of interconnectedness very clear, and by introducing some of the characters and letting us know what happens to them in the story world – helps give the reader the lie of the land, some idea as to how the characters relate to each other and the tools with which to manoeuvre through the story before they start reading it.

EE: Ideally, what would you like 17-year-old South African students to gain from reading the novel?

SGN: Although the novel has as its protagonist an HIV-positive heroine and the story deals with such issues as civil war, genocide, displacement, homelessness and the many challenges of the colonial and postcolonial state, the story is not a tale of doom and gloom nor does it traffic in clichés and stereotypes about Africa. The story is more concerned with the creation of community and the shared sense of belonging that particular histories create. In this way, it brings together characters who belong to different categories of society in terms of race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, 'ability' and age, who, through their interactions with Genie – whose life is touched by civil war, genocide and HIV/AIDS and, therefore, acts as a symbol of these violent histories – have to come to relate to one another, to create their own relationship with that history and move towards

a shared sense of belonging. While the story deals with some heavy themes, it is a meditation on love and loss that is ultimately hopeful, optimistic even, in its belief in the power of self-knowledge, self-determination, self-realisation, art and communion to soothe the effects of various histories of violence.



© @stevenchikosi

Activity on Jason Moyo Ave by Steven Chikosi (2018). Although he doesn't ignore its problems, young photographer and Instagrammer Steven Chikosi captures scenes of Zimbabwean life that avoid stereotypes of African poverty and suffering.

While the story deals with some heavy themes, it is a meditation on love and loss that is ultimately hopeful, optimistic even, in its belief in the power of self-knowledge, self-determination, self-realisation, art and communion to soothe the effects of various histories of violence.

Southern Africa has had a challenging and often-times difficult post-colonial/post-Apartheid history that has been compounded by the ravages of HIV/AIDS. While it is important to acknowledge this, it is also important to celebrate the resilience and determination of those who find something beautiful to love in this context – this is what *The Theory of Flight* does. This is what the story is: a celebration.

EE: What advice would you offer students on how to engage best with the novel?

SGN: The best advice I can give to students engaging with *The Theory of Flight* is this – don't think in terms of major and minor characters; think instead of how the characters connect. If you are a visual thinker, create a community tree or web and trace/delineate how the characters connect not only to each other but to the various moments of history portrayed in the novel – the civil war, the genocide and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. If you like thinking in terms of metaphors and similes, read the story as though it were a multi-coloured garment being knitted together. In the beginning, stitches of many different colours are being cast on, and it can seem overwhelming, but remember that all those stitches play a very important role, and all come together to create a cohesive whole. There is no superfluous character. Finally, read not to 'get' the story from the very beginning but to allow the story to create its intricate and interwoven tapestry.

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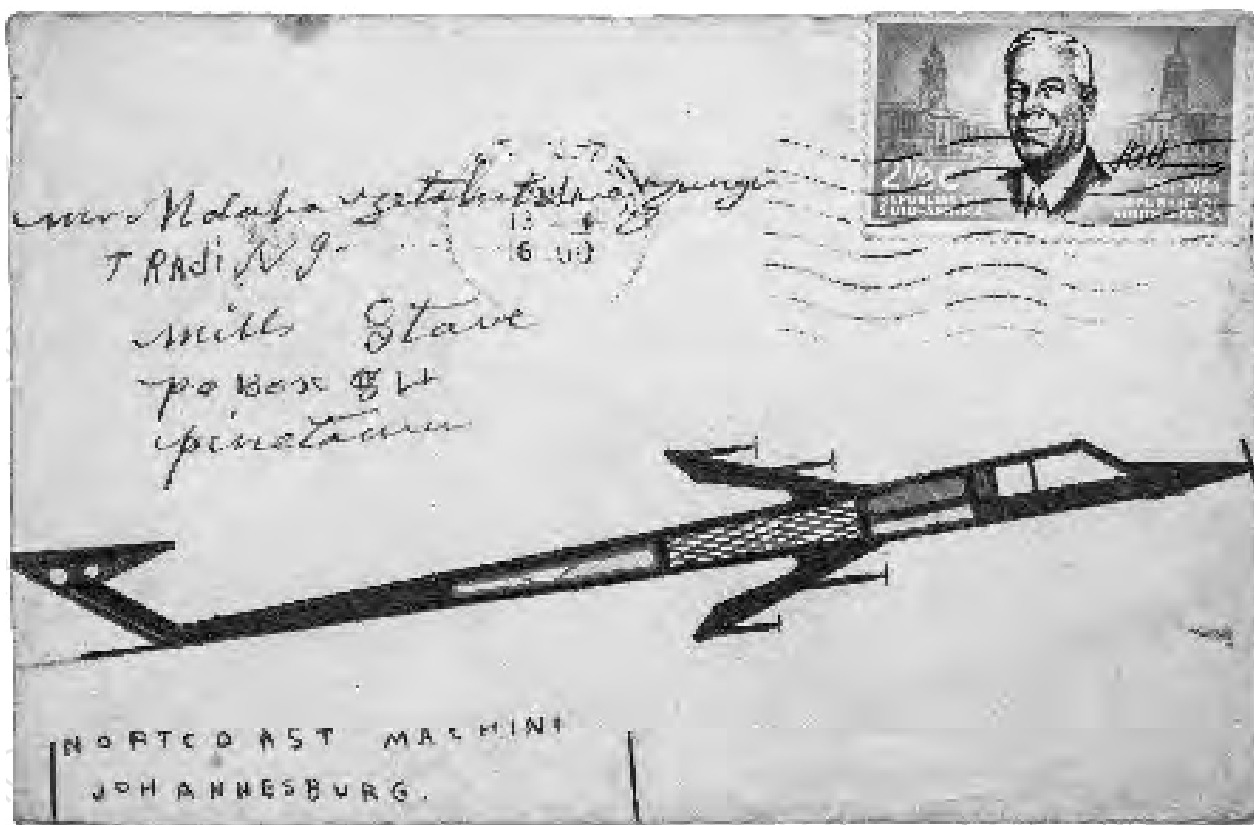
EE: Do you think teenagers will be able to relate to Genie and her experiences?

SGN: Genie's experiences may seem far-removed from those of a typical teenager living in the twenty-first century due to the fact that they happen within the context of civil war/genocide/HIV-AIDS – things that happened between the 1970s and 1990s – but Genie's story is at heart about love, family, community – things we all have experience with, regardless of the era in which we live.

More importantly, as already mentioned, Genie's story is an exploration of the self's relation to itself, to others and to the state. Genie has to negotiate her sense of self constantly when she encounters others who have a different sense of who she should be, when she is written upon by violent histories, when the state wants to reduce her to a body or a statistic. She negotiates but never compromises her sense of self – she chooses to hold on to her 'self' tenaciously. This is a lesson from which we all, teenagers particularly, can learn. Psychologists call this need and search for a true, unique and known self 'individuation'. Individuation is a lifelong process that is, perhaps, at its most fraught stage during our teen years when we begin to realise certain things about ourselves, our families, our communities, our countries, our world. So, yes, I think teenagers will be able to relate to Genie and her experiences on many levels.

EE: What advice would you offer students interpreting the symbolism of the silver wings?

SGN: In terms of the giant pair of silver wings, it is important to think of them in their context. Golide Gumede simply wants to get Elizabeth Nyoni to Nashville, Tennessee, as he promised. He knows something about aeroplanes and so he builds a giant pair of silver wings, but The Man Himself feels threatened by Golide's ability to build the wings. Why? The answer is provided, in part, by Dingani Masuku when he tells his friends, Jameson and Xolani, 'Now you see, a man like Golide Gumede is the



Envelope by Deton (Tito) Zungu (1969). Zungu was a South African artist who used ballpoint pens to create whimsical images of aeroplanes on many different surfaces. As travel was difficult for impoverished black people under apartheid, his works have a sense of longing and fantasy to them.

kind of man that this country really needs. The man is building an aeroplane from scratch. Believes he can do it, too. He is innovative. Radical. Fearless. If this country had even just one hundred such men and women, then this thing we call independence would hold more promise.' (p. 301) It is important then, in light of this, to think of what The Man Himself represents? What about Valentine Tanaka's family that laughs at Golide Gumede's belief in himself and his ability? What about Bhekithemba Nyathi's refusal to believe that Golide is acting out of love? How can we connect all this to what we have learnt through our examination of the self's relation to itself, others and the state? What do the giant pair of silver wings that both Genie and her parents fly away on symbolise in this larger context?

EE: What do you believe the novel suggests about family and belonging?

SGN: Throughout your life your family will grow and, if you let it, it will grow to include people not connected to you by the bonds of blood. These will be people who you either have an affinity with or, if you are lucky and brave enough, people who are vastly different from you and challenge you and your ways of being and seeing the world. Together you can come to create a shared sense of belonging and a community.

Family is what and how you make it. The ability to choose who belongs to your family is important and potentially empowering because the 'family' is not an inherently unproblematic space – some families are toxic, some dysfunctional, some incomplete, some destroyed – choosing your own family can be a way of healing the hurt of the past.

EE: How would you recommend students assess what the novel suggests about community and the interconnectedness of our lives? Would you consider *Ubuntu* a useful concept in this context?

SGN: I have already discussed the first part of this question in my responses to some earlier questions so I will focus on how *Ubuntu* is a useful concept when thinking about community and interconnectedness in *The Theory of Flight*. *Ubuntu* is certainly a great way to begin excavating the interactions and connections that the various characters in the novel have. Their relation to Genie's life and death can be seen as opening up the possibilities of a shared sense of belonging and an understanding of a shared humanity – in many ways this is what the novel is moving and working towards; however, it is also



important to understand why this shared sense of belonging and this understanding of a shared humanity are not there from the very beginning – why they are things that need to be worked out. If *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*... If I am because we are... If I can only be because you also are... If this imbricated

understanding of our humanity is our cornerstone philosophy here in southern Africa, then how do we explain histories of violence – civil war, genocide, displacement – what is it that has happened here to make us lose sight of our shared humanity? The answer seems ready enough: – colonisation and apartheid have happened. But is this too easy an answer? Is *Ubuntu* an ideal – something to be striven for but never obtained? Or it is something that has been taken away from us by a particularly violent modern history?

These are vital questions that we have to ask ourselves as citizens of postcolonial/post-apartheid countries because this is where we begin the work of starting to re-see and re-discover the humanity in each other.

EE: What would you suggest the novel implies about the relationship between the past and the present?

SGN: I have already discussed this in response to previous questions; however, I will add here that what the old adage says is very true – if we don't learn from the past, we are apt to repeat it. The present is a product of the past and so it is important for us to understand the present through understanding the past. Most times we don't want to do this because the past is often weighty and has unfinished business – this is particularly true when histories have been violent, and especially true when we think we have been complicit or have colluded in some way with these histories.



As William Wordsworth said, 'Life is divided into three terms - that which was, which is, and which will be. Let us learn from the past to profit by the present, and from the present, to live better in the future.' These sage words can be used to understand the character arcs of most of the characters in *The Theory of Flight* better. Let us take, for example, Krystle Masuku. She feels responsible for the accident that she believes led to Genie becoming HIV-positive and so she lets guilt become her constant companion. She feels complicit and is trapped by her complicity. Krystle learns of Genie's diagnosis just as she enters adolescence and when we later meet her as an adult it is very clear that her feelings of guilt and complicity have arrested her development and stunted her growth in the present. But how can she move on and learn from the past when her family proudly does not 'do politics' in a place where politics has overdetermined the shape of history?

The present is a product of the past and so it is important for us to understand the present through understanding the past. Most times we don't want to do this because the past is often weighty and has unfinished business – this is particularly true when histories have been violent, and especially true when we think we have been complicit or have colluded in some way with these histories.

EE: What advice would you offer students pondering the symbolism of the swimming elephants?

SGN: It helps to think of the swimming elephants in much the same way you think about the silver wings and flight.



© Hanay (Wikimedia Commons)

Elephants crossing the Zambezi river.

By swimming across the Zambezi River, the elephants are doing something seemingly impossible – but something that they know, in spite of appearances, that they can do. They illustrate what happens when you possess a true belief in yourself and what you are capable of.

Elephants also have incredible and long memories... How can we connect this to what Golide Gumede, Genie and the omniscient narrator, at various stages of the novel, say about watching swimming elephants, 'You become aware of your place in the world... You understand that in the grander scheme of things

you are but a speck... a tiny speck... and that that is enough... There is freedom... beauty even, in that kind of knowledge... It is the kind of knowledge that finally quiets you. It is the kind of knowledge that allows you to fly. You have to experience it for yourself'

EE: How would you recommend students explore the significance and meaning of the intriguing remark made by several characters that their ‘eyes are not for beauty to see’?

SGN: I am very curious to see what students and readers make of this phrase, which becomes a motif, so I will not make many recommendations. I will say this, however: I think the best place to start unpacking this remark is by asking what this ‘beauty’ is... I will leave it at that.

EE: What role would you suggest is played by art and artistry in the novel?

SGN: An idea that I love and one that is the cornerstone of my understanding of art and artistry is taken from the classic text *On the Sublime* by ‘Longinus’ in which he says of great writing, ‘For, as if instinctively, our soul is uplifted by the true sublime; it takes a proud flight, and is filled with joy and vaunting, as though it had itself produced what it has heard.’ Here we have flight again, this idea that a successful work of art is one that transports us, takes us to other worlds but also makes us feel as though we are collaborating with the artist – that we have co-produced something together – this is empathy at its most beautiful and profound level.

In *The Theory of Flight* this potential that art has to allow us to fly is examined through the lives and works of three characters: Golide Gumedé, Elizabeth Nyoni and Vida de Villiers. Golide Gumedé builds a giant pair of silver wings that inspires awe in the race of angels that watches him and envy/jealousy/fear in *The Man Himself*. Elizabeth Nyoni is a musician who believes her talents need to find their way to Nashville, Tennessee. Vida de Villiers is a sculptor who becomes world-famous. Through their work they are able to transport and inspire people.

So why does *The Man Himself* treat them all as dangerous threats? If *The Man Himself* is a stand-in for the state and power then what is it about art that threatens the state? As I mentioned earlier, the state wants to have a monopoly on narratives of the past; it also wants to have control over our understanding of the present; however, there is one thing that can never be controlled and that is the imagination. Art, therefore, creates a space that is difficult to regulate and manage. Art, therefore, becomes an alternative space where alternative stories and histories can be told. Art, therefore, is potentially the place for the non-believers – those who look to other narratives beyond those crafted by the state.



© Karen Cusolito (picture: @Somar94583529)

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EE: Vida is quite critical of his new status as a 'postcolonial artist'. Do you think such labels risk imposing a meaning on the artwork the artist did not intend. Do they flatten any alternative interpretation?

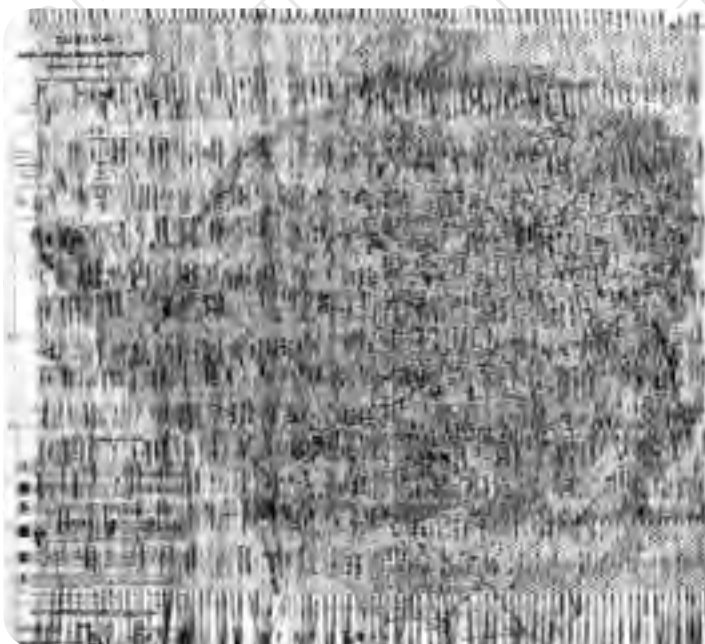
SGN: As a consumer of art and as an academic, I understand the practical need for labels and categories. Manoeuvring through a library or a bookstore or an art gallery or deciding what film to watch would be an absolute nightmare without things being classified and ordered in certain ways. That said, categories can be limiting, especially when, as humans, we tend to add value judgements to certain categories. I think most artworks are doing more than one thing and so to highlight only one aspect of what they are doing is not to tell their full story. So, yes, labels can impose unintended meaning, flatten what the work of art is trying to achieve and disallow any alternative interpretations.



© Lizza Littlewort

EE: What would you suggest the novel implies about land and nationhood? Would you recommend students use Esme's summary of Krystle's thesis as a starting point when considering these aspects? How important do you consider this theme to the novel?

SGN: Yes, students should use Esme's summary of Krystle's dissertation as a means of understanding what the novel is saying about land and nationhood. Krystle's dissertation in the novel is actually the dissertation that I wrote as a PhD candidate, *'A Country with Land but no Habitat': Travel and Belonging in Colonial Southern Rhodesia and Post-Colonial Zimbabwe*. The dissertation puts the ever-



Z\$535,507,918 by Dan Halter, a Zimbabwean artist who lives and works in South Africa. His work deals with the politics and migrancy between Zimbabwe and South Africa. This artwork is a map of Zimbabwean farming regions, with a twist: it is woven with shredded Zimbabwean bank notes amounting to Z\$535,507,918.

growing Zimbabwean diaspora of the twenty-first century within the larger context of precolonial, colonial and postcolonial movements, settlements and displacements in the region. Central to my thesis is the idea that the country is a well-travelled space and that those who inhabit it, in addition to being marked by race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality and class, are also marked indelibly by travel, which creates an unsettled sense of not belonging.

At the time I was trying to write both the dissertation and the novel, which ultimately proved very rewarding, but in the moment filled me with frustration and apprehension, and so I decided to

satirise Krystle's writing of the dissertation in the novel. While I make fun of the dissertation-writing process, the content of the dissertation is one I take seriously. In Zimbabwe and South Africa, the idea of belonging is tied to the land. I do not agree with the idea of attaching belonging to the land because that way of thinking tends to exclude rather than include. If we want to achieve true nationhood for all citizens then we need to decouple belonging from the land.

As a Zimbabwean, I think the one thing that connects us and brings us all together is this idea of travel, that we all, for different reasons, are moving in and out of or within the country and that we have done so throughout our postcolonial, colonial and precolonial histories. If we could actually build a sense of identity and belonging around a history of movement, then I think it is a more inclusive and sustainable way of thinking about the Zimbabwean... being Zimbabwean... belonging to Zimbabwe.

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EE: *The Theory of Flight* is set in an unnamed southern African country, but it is clear from much of the detail provided that this country is Zimbabwe. What was your reason for leaving the setting unnamed?

SGN: There are reasons – some practical, some political – for leaving the setting unnamed. Most importantly, not naming the country allows the story to travel and transport itself so that while it is very much a story about a particular place, it is also, at the same time, a story that can take place anywhere, which, I hope, helps us focus more on what the story is *about* and not so much on where it is set. The things that happen within the story – war, violence, pandemics, love, loss etc., – are things that are held in common by all nations of the world so, for me, the where is not as important as the how, when and why. In addition, the country in which my novels are set has had four name changes throughout its modern history. Due to its histories of violence and its current economic and political dysfunction, I think the colonial and postcolonial names of the country have a lot of weight and baggage attached to them that I don't really want readers to bring to the text. I want us all to start thinking beyond our received perceptions when it comes to this southern African country. Moreover, since, in some sense, I write historical fiction, it could become rather messy to have to contend with these changes in the course of reading the story.

EE: What do you believe Genie and Vida's relationship suggests about love?

SGN: Genie and Vida's relationship unfolds in Part V of Book One, which is titled 'Epidemiology: Love in the Time of HIV'. The context in which their love story takes shape is very important. They meet during a time of erosion and reduction where they are the unvalued or devalued members of society – an HIV-positive girl and a street-dwelling man. Vida's life has been reduced to the bare life of the

streets and the quality of life on the streets is continually eroded as the postcolonial years go by. Genie is reduced to a statistic – the one in four adults who are HIV-positive. In addition, Vida, as an artist, presents a threat to the powers that be, which makes his position in society even more precarious. According to the state, these are the people that can easily be forgotten – people who end up like the bodies that the war veterans dig up on the Beauford Farm and Estate. But it is always important to remember, as Valentine says of Genie in his discussion with The Man Himself, that ‘she was someone who had lived a life that mattered. They all had... She was never just a statistic. She was always more than just a tragic life’ (p. 322). It is because Genie knows this, it is because she holds on to herself that she can find love in such a time and context. Dr Mambo puts it best when she says, ‘[l]ove was such a rare commodity. It took real courage to seek it, to hold on to it and to treasure it... At a time when it would have been so much easier to allow one’s self to give in to the barrenness of existence, love was the truest defiance’ (p. 241).

In other words, what the relationship between Genie and Vida suggests about love is that it can be used as a weapon to fight against being reduced to just a body or bare life or a statistic. Love can also be a balm that heals old wounds... that begins to repair the damage done by violent histories. It is very telling that at the very beginning of their relationship, Genie and Vida share their histories in their entirety and hide nothing from each other. It is this honesty that frees them to love. ‘Laid bare and armed with the knowledge of each other’s truth, they had no choice but to accept each other as they were. It was a liberation’ (p. 165).



© Obba (International Gallery of the Arts)

[W]hat the relationship between Genie and Vida suggests about love is that it can be used as a weapon to fight against being reduced to just a body or bare life or a statistic.



© Cecil Skotness

EE: HIV/AIDS is an important focus in *The Theory of Flight*. Genie’s illness and death are described both gently and beautifully, incorporating elements of magical realism. What are your thoughts about the way in which illness is represented in the novel and was there anything in particular that you were trying to achieve in representing it the way you have?

SGN: For the early part of its history, HIV/AIDS was a very devastating illness – often seen as a death sentence. Before antiretroviral medications became available or easily affordable, people had to suffer through its ravages without much amelioration. Compounding

the situation was a lot of misinformation about how the illness was spread and so fear ruled how the illness was viewed and treated – stigma was common, as were abuse and neglect. But, again, these were lives that mattered and they deserved to be treated with respect and dignity, which is what I hope I have done in the novel.

EE: Do you believe it is useful to consider Marcus as a foil to Vida?

SGN: Yes, it is, especially when we compare their characters through the lenses of self, history, art and love.

EE: Would you argue that the witnesses are reconciled to Genie's death by the end of the novel?

SGN: Some yes, some no. They are all on different journeys and cannot arrive at the same destination at the same time. As Vida says, '[t]here is courage in letting Genie go. There is courage, too, in not letting Genie go entirely' (p. 326).

EE: In your opinion, which character is transformed to the greatest extent by Genie's extraordinary death?

SGN: Marcus. Genie's death makes him finally wake up from the dream of a Beauford Farm and Estate that is still the idyll of his childhood. 'It is in that moment that Marcus realises that he has been holding on to something that Genie let go of a long time ago' (p. 316). Her death makes him finally confront the violent history that he has been denying for most of his life. He begins to allow the past to inform his present so that he can move on into the future.

EE: If you were asked to try and summarise the message of *The Theory of Flight*, how would you do so?

SGN: Circumstances, others, the state, certain histories will try to change you and so it is important in life to know yourself and to hold on to yourself – it is this knowledge and tenacity that will allow you to relate better to circumstances, others, the state, certain histories.

Circumstances, others, the state, certain histories will try to change you and so it is important in life to know yourself and to hold on to yourself – it is this knowledge and tenacity that will allow you to relate better to circumstances, others, the state, certain histories.

EE: Did you have a particular audience in mind when you wrote *The Theory of Flight*?

SGN: The wonderful thing about art is that it finds its own audience. The other wonderful thing is that this is not something that you, as an artist, can control.



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EE: What reactions to the novel from readers have surprised you the most?

SGN: I have been more than pleasantly surprised by the warm reception that the book has received. As a novelist you tend to spend a long time with your characters in their world – I know I have spent years with every character I have written. You get to know and love them, but you also get used to them being yours and while you want to share them with the world, you are also apprehensive – like a parent sending their child off to preschool for the first time. What if the world doesn't like your creation? So, it is very nice, rewarding and surprising when people like and appreciate what you have done.

EE: Are there any particular works or authors you would recommend to students who are keen to explore the issues you raise in *The Theory of Flight* further?

SGN: I kept this list strictly southern African:

Gabeba Baderoon – *The History of Intimacy: Poems*

Ellen Banda-Aaku – *Patchwork*

Shimmer Chinodya – *Harvest of Thorns*

Imraan Coovadia – *High Low In-Between*

Tsitsi Dangarembga – *Nervous Conditions*

Nozizwe Cynthia Jele – *The Ones with Purpose*

Resoketswe Manenzhe – *Scatterlings*

Dambudzo Marechera – *The House of Hunger*

Zakes Mda – *Ways of Dying*

Sue Nyathi – *The Gold Diggers*

Bryony Rheam – *This September Sun*

Yvonne Vera – *Without a Name, Butterfly Burning, and The Stone Virgins*

EE: Are there authors or books you would recommend South African teenagers read?

SGN: This ended up being the most difficult question for me to answer because I think teenagers should read as widely as possible, but I also know that we tend not to read 'local' when young, so I just chose a handful of South African authors.

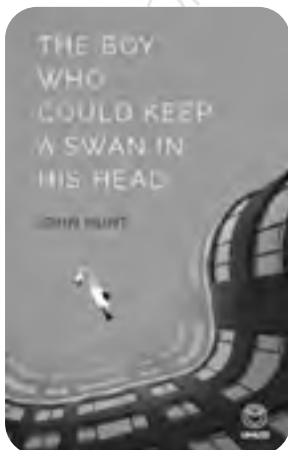
John Hunt – *The Boy Who Could Keep a Swan in His Head*

Kopano Matlwa – *Coconut*

Sifiso Mzobe – *Young Blood*

Masande Ntshanga – *The Reactive*

Zoë Wicomb – *Playing in the Light*



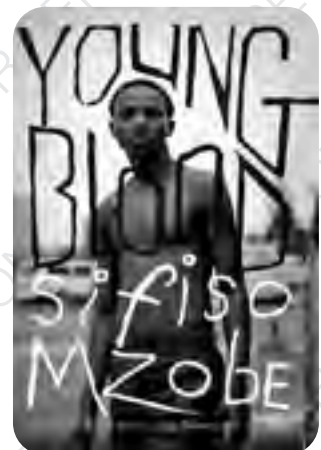
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Enrichment task

Exercise 1: Visual literacy

Consider the following cartoon and answer the questions that follow:

Source: www.mg.co.za/cartoons/2013-06-20-1913-land-act-how-far-has-sa-come/



1.1 What message does the cartoon convey? (3)

1.2 Identify the Figure of Speech that has been visually depicted using the snail, and comment on its effectiveness. (3)

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1.3 What is the significance of the woman using the board for shelter, and how does this contribute to the message of the cartoon? (2)

1.4.1 How would you describe the expression on the woman's face? (1)

1.4.2 Why do you think she feels this way? (2)

Consider the following cartoon and answer the questions that follow :



*Source: www.independent.co.uk/voices/south-africa-land-expropriation-compensation-economy-effects-a8497996.html

1.5 What are the literal and figurative meanings of 'turf' employed in this cartoon? (2)

1.6 What message does the cartoon convey? (3)

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1.7 By referring to both of the cartoons provided, compare and contrast the message that each seeks to convey. (4)

[20]

Critical commentary

Preparation

Reading novels for academic analysis

When reading a novel that you are required to analyse for academic purposes, it is best to approach the text in a slightly different way than you would if reading a novel for pleasure. The following are a few tips to keep in mind when reading novels for academic analysis.

- **Eliminate distractions**

It may sound obvious, but make sure you are paying attention when you read. Often when we are reading, our attention wanders and we do not really take in what it is that we are reading. Be sure that when you are reading a novel for academic purposes, your attention stays focused and that you are not distracted by your phone, television, friends or family members.

- **Make notes and highlight**

Make notes in the page margins as you read. Marking important passages as you read them will help you save time when you are looking for them again later and will also help to keep you focused as you read.

- **Discover and confirm meanings**

Underline unfamiliar words so that you can look up their definitions and make a note of their meanings.

- **Look for themes, motifs and symbols**

Keep the themes of the novel in mind as you are reading and keep asking yourself how these themes are being explored, conveyed and developed in the narrative. Make notes of any recurring motifs and symbols and what these represent in the text.



© len-yan (Deviantart)

Detecting patterns of meaning and form

Remember that you are reading for meaning (what is being said) and for form (how it is being conveyed). Literary analysis is about detecting patterns in the text and determining how these patterns convey particular messages. The following are a few questions to keep in mind when detecting patterns of meaning and form when reading novels for academic analysis.

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Patterns of meaning

Themes (i.e. what is the text saying?)

- How is the plot structured?
- What happens in the narrative, and in what order?
- Where and when does the story take place?
- Who is the subject of the story?
- What are the recurring themes in the narrative?
- What message is being conveyed?
- How do you feel about what is happening in the story?

Patterns of form

Technique (i.e. how is it being said?)

- Who is the narrator of the text? When or on what occasion(s) is this narration taking place?
- How does the point of view from which the story is being told affect our understanding?
- How are the characters developed throughout the text? How do they interact with one another, and why?
- Is the narration sequential or achronological? Are there flashbacks or flash-forwards? Why is the narration structured in this way?
- What symbols and motifs recur in the text and how do they reinforce the themes of the novel?
- What do the title and chapter headings tell us about this narrative and how we should interpret it?



© Eduardo Estrada



'Study hard, for the well is deep,
and our brains are shallow.'

- RICHARD BAXTER -



Glossary of important literary terms

antagonist: a character in the narrative who is presented as the main foe of the **protagonist**.

archetype: a very typical or common example of a particular type of person or thing.

bildungsroman: a genre of literature in which the protagonist, usually an adolescent, undergoes spiritual, intellectual, moral, psychological and/or social growth throughout the course of the narrative and, in doing so, achieves maturity. Also known as a 'coming-of-age' story.

catharsis: the often painful process through which a character heals, usually through the release of strong or repressed emotions.

connotation: an idea, association or feeling that is evoked by the use of a particular word, in addition to its literal meaning.

context: the 'things around the text'; the particular circumstances that form the setting for a narrative event, statement or idea.

dénouement: the climax or finale of a narrative in which the various strands of the plot are drawn together or resolved.

diction: the choice of words used.

discourse: written or spoken communication or, in literary terms, the treatment of a particular subject within the narrative.

foil: a character who contrasts starkly with another character, usually the protagonist, in order to emphasise the particular qualities or traits of the other character.

form: the structure or design of a particular literary work.

genre: in literary terms, a particular and distinguishable category of writing which employs distinct, common conventions that are recognisable across all works of the same type.

ideology: a system of beliefs or ideals which often forms the basis for a political or economic policy such as apartheid, democracy (political), capitalism, socialism (economic).

irony: a perceptible inconsistency (sometimes humorous) in an apparently straightforward statement or situation which, given its particular context, takes on the opposite meaning or significance. In the case of **dramatic irony**, the reader or audience may know more about the character's situation or circumstances than the character and is, consequently, able to recognise a sharply different or contrasting perception of the situation to the character.

metaphor, metaphoric: a Figure of Speech in which one thing is taken to represent or symbolise something else, in order to transfer particular associations or qualities on to the thing or idea being represented.

paradox, paradoxical: a statement that is so obviously untrue or contradictory that it leads the reader to consider alternative contexts in which it may be considered accurate; or a situation, person or thing that combines contradictory features or qualities.

point of view: the position or vantage point from which the events of a story are presented to the reader.

protagonist: the main/central character in the narrative.

syntax: the way in which words, phrases and clauses are arranged to form a sentence.

theme: the central message, idea or insight of a literary work.

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Summaries and analyses

Using this section

Working through the novel chapter by chapter ensures that a solid foundation of knowledge is laid, and then gradually and effectively expanded. Students are not required to deal with the entire novel until they have worked through it in a methodical, step-by-step manner.

Each chapter and sub-section is summarised and analysed separately. Extensive glossaries are included, and learners are required to engage with the content directly through chapter-specific questions. At the end of the summaries, there is also a series of enrichment tasks and a wide selection of rigorous essay topics, ensuring that students tackle the novel in its entirety and are prepared for the final examination.

Prologue (pp. 9 – 10)

Summary

The prologue begins by explaining that ‘something truly wondrous happened on the Beauford Farm and Estate’ (p. 9) and that, when she died, Imogen Zula Nyoni (Genie) ‘was seen to fly away on a giant pair of silver wings, and, at the very same moment, her heart calcified into the most precious and beautiful something the onlookers had ever seen’ (p. 9). The narrator then addresses the reader directly, noting that because ‘most of you have eyes that are not for beauty to see [...] you will not believe that such a truly amazing phenomenon did take place’

(p. 9). The narrator then explains that it is for both those who doubt that this event occurred and for those who do not doubt the narrator but are curious about these events that the story is ‘choosing to be told’ (p. 9).

The narrator asserts that Genie’s story did not happen ‘in a vacuum: it was the result of a culmination of genealogies, histories, teleologies, epistemologies and epidemiologies – of ways of living, remembering, seeing, knowing and dying’ (p. 9). Thus, to tell her story, the narrator also needs to tell the stories of many other characters. The remainder of the prologue is then used to provide a very brief summary of the different events that need to be told in conjunction with Genie’s story.



© Sana Shaw



Glossary

calcified (p.9): to be converted into lime, a calcium-containing inorganic mineral

phenomenon (p.9): a fact or occurrence of which the cause may be in question

culmination (p.9): the attainment of an endpoint

genealogy (p.9): an account of one’s descent from an ancestor or ancestors

teleology (p.9): branch of study that deals with ends or final causes

epistemology (p.9): theory of knowledge and understanding

epidemiology (p.9): study of epidemics

wanderlust (p.9): desire for travelling

Metatextual reference

(metareference) (p.9): when a character seems aware that s/he is part of a work of fiction

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Leonardo da Vinci's flying machine

Leonardo da Vinci is perhaps most famous for his paintings like the *Mona Lisa*, but he also imagined several inventions, including machines like the tank and submarine. He was fascinated with flight as well and drew plans for a flying machine (pictured) around 1490, roughly 400 years before the Wright brothers successfully flew in 1903.



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Analysis

Although the prologue is short, the reader is presented with some important information. Firstly, the reader learns that one character has died in 'wondrous' (p. 9) circumstances. The narrator then imagines the audience's reaction to their statement and responds to it by apparently challenging the reader, explaining that those who do not 'have eyes [...] for beauty to see' (p. 9) will not believe them. The narrator's explanation that this story is for both those who do not believe them and for those who do, but wish to learn more, is an invitation to keep reading – the narrator does not make provision for any category of reader for whom the novel has not been written – and is also perhaps meant to encourage the reader to be one of those who do 'have eyes [...] for beauty to see' (p. 9).

This technique of directly addressing the reader is an example of a **metatextual reference**, or **metareference**, where a character – here, the narrator – seems aware that they are part of a work of fiction. They display such an awareness both by directly addressing the reader and by contextualising the story they are about to tell, indicating that they are not part of that story themselves. The author perhaps uses this technique for several reasons. The first is that they may want the reader to approach this work not as a usual work of fiction, but rather to approach it as if the story that is about to be told is real. Moreover, perhaps by having the narrator express that they are merely the agent through which this story will be told, they are conveying a sense of reliability, or objectivity. In other words, because this is not their story, nor is it their decision to tell this tale, the narrator can be trusted to be honest with the reader, who in turn is asked to treat this story as real.



© Wilfredo Lam

The narrator justifies their approach to telling the story – that to do so, they will also need to tell the stories of various other characters – by explaining that a life is not lived in isolation; in reality each individual is affected by other people and, in turn, by their decisions, both past and present. The narrator gives numerous examples of how other characters' personalities and decisions affected Genie's life, giving very brief, often cryptic, insights, which foreshadow the events told in greater detail later in the novel. It is only by reading the novel that the prologue makes sense, and all the connections among the different characters become clearer.

Questions

1. It is arguable that all novels require readers to suspend their disbelief when reading, yet few draw attention to that fact. Do you think the narrator was justified in doing so in this novel? Explain the reason for your answer. (3)

2. The narrator mentions several characters who are part of Genie's story. What is the effect of doing so? (2)

[5]

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BOOK ONE

Part I: Genealogy

Genesis (pp. 15 – 26)

Summary



At the beginning of this chapter, the narrator explains that after 'spending the night with Golide Gumedé, Elizabeth Nyoni felt something give way in the space that he had come to occupy in her heart – it travelled through her body and found its way onto her mattress' (p. 15). This object is a 'shiny golden egg' (p. 15), which she believes binds her to Golide. The narrator then moves back through time to briefly explain who Golide's parents were, and how they met. We learn that Golide's father, Bafana Ndelaphi, was a salesman's assistant who loved to travel. As Bafana felt an affinity for the explorers he had read about when he was younger, he decided to change his name to Baines Tikiti: 'Baines' after **Thomas Baines**, and 'Tikiti' after 'ticket' – 'something one purchased in order to go on a journey. Something that gave one purpose' (p. 16).

The chapter then details how Baines marries Prudence Ngoma but is unable to stop travelling. When Prudence visits Baines in South Africa, she brings with him their son, christened **Livingstone Stanley** Tikiti; however, because of the pale colour of Livingstone's skin, Baines decides that the life of travel he has prepared for them is no longer appropriate. Prudence, who is again pregnant, returns home with Livingstone, who leaves with 'the memory of a distant father and a knowledge and understanding of flight' (p. 20). One day, news reaches Prudence that Baines 'walked into [the Indian Ocean] and allowed himself to be carried away by its waves. Never to return' (p. 21).



Glossary

benevolence (p.15): kindness, generosity

incongruous (p.16): inconsistent

miserly (p.16): stingy, mean, ungenerous

pill (p.17): form small balls of fluff on the surface of a fabric

rhinestones (p.17): rock crystal cut like a gem; imitation diamond

gramophone (p.18): instrument used to play pre-recorded music

ennui (p.18): weariness, dissatisfaction

sage (p.21): wise

sanguine (p.21): hopeful, confident of success

nom de guerre (p.22): a name used to hide one's identity (lit: name of war)

aeronautical (p.22): related to flight

reconnaissance (p.22): the act of examining a piece of land to gain useful information before engaging in military action.

bona fide (p.24): genuine, real

aerodynamics (p.24): a branch of science that deals with the way objects move through air

monopoly (p.24): exclusive control

guerilla (p.25): small, independent groups of people taking part in irregular, often impromptu, fighting

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Prudence, having learnt the importance of character from observing its absence in her husband, raises her children 'to be proud and strong, to not be afraid of humility and vulnerability, to hold their heads at a particular angle and never feel or look defeated by whatever life dealt them' (p. 21), in other words, to have character.

Livingstone grows into a confident man whom people seem to view as a leader. He joins the freedom fighters and, like his father before him, changes his name – to Golide Gumede. The last pages of the chapter detail how, after he was sent to study aeronautical engineering by the resistance, he meets Elizabeth Nyoni and imagines 'building a giant pair of silver wings' (p. 24); however, because building an aeroplane would be expensive, he decides to shoot down a passenger plane, which he envisages 'land[ing] virtually undamaged in the guerilla camp' (p. 25). While he prepares to carry out this task near the Victoria Falls, Golide witnesses elephants swimming across the river near the edge of the falls, which he describes as 'a rite of passage made sacred by its sheer audacity' (p. 25). Golide then has a vision of the golden egg hatching and the emergence of his daughter, Genie, from within.



Thomas Baines (27 November 1820 – 8 May 1875) was an English artist and explorer of British colonial Australia and Africa. Baines documented his travels both through art and writing. Some of his artworks are housed today in MuseuMAfrica in Newtown, Johannesburg, the National Library of Australia and the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town. His published works include *The Gold Regions of South Eastern Africa* (1877) and *Explorations in South-West Africa* (1864).



© National Library of Australia



David Livingstone (19 March 1813 – 1 May 1873) was a Scottish physician, missionary and explorer who travelled in central and southern Africa in the hopes of helping to end slavery. Livingstone documented his travels in his journals, letters and books. He is credited as being the first European to see the Victoria Falls, which he named after Queen Victoria, and the first to cross the width of the southern part of the continent. His final expedition was in search of the source of the Nile River. Livingstone died in Zambia and, while his body was returned to England and buried in Westminster Abbey, his friends buried his heart under a tree near the spot where he had died.



© www.sahistory.org.za



Henry Morton Stanley (28 January 1841 – 10 May 1904) was born in Wales and was named John Rowlands. At 18 years of age, Rowlands emigrated to America and changed his name. Stanley travelled in Turkey and Ethiopia as a journalist and correspondent and, in 1869, was given the task of locating David Livingstone, who had gone missing. After travelling nearly 1120 kilometers, Stanley found Livingstone on 10 November 1871. After Livingstone died in 1873, Stanley continued his research into the Nile and Congo river systems, followed by an expedition into the Congo. He later returned to England and died in London.



© Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis

Analysis

As indicated by both the title of Part I: 'Genealogy' and the title of the chapter, 'Genesis', these pages are concerned with beginnings – specifically, the beginning of Genie's story. As the narrator indicates in the Prologue, however, Genie's story cannot be told without reference to those around her – and this chapter begins with the stories of Genie's parents and grandparents. More specifically, because Genie's life will be affected by Golide's decision to try to build an aeroplane, the narrator illustrates how Golide came to be fascinated with flight – through his father.

One key theme that is introduced in this chapter is that of one's origins and family and, in turn, what it means to belong. Since Golide has also ostensibly been rejected by his father owing to the paleness of his skin, he believes his fascination with aeroplanes is a result of his attempt to 'bridge the distance that his father had created' (p. 24). Yet once Golide meets Elizabeth Nyoni and his 'fate' (p. 23) has been 'seal[ed]' (p. 23), he realises that perhaps instead of using his knowledge of flight to bridge an impossible distance, he can instead 'prepar[e] himself to be useful in Elizabeth's life' (p. 24). In return, she would 'prepare [a home] for him' (p. 24).



Dolly Parton is an American country music singer and actress who enjoyed considerable commercial success between the 1960s and 1980s. She composed over 3 000 songs, including the hits "I Will Always Love You" and "Jolene".

Thus, while Golide seemingly asks to be allowed to shoot down an aeroplane in order to 'teach people about how aeroplanes work before the war was over' (p. 25), it appears that he does so at least partly so that he can help Elizabeth realise her dreams of becoming 'a bona fide country-and-western singer' (p. 24) in Nashville, Tennessee. Yet, whatever his motivations are, the consequences remain unchanged. In the final paragraph of the chapter, Golide experiences a vision. In that vision, he sees Elizabeth going to the Beauford Farm and Estate and the egg cracking open to reveal his daughter, Genie. It appears that a direct link is made here between the missile, the vision and the sight of the exploding **Vickers Viscount** – what is not clear is why, and how, these events are related.

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A **Vickers Viscount**, the model of aeroplane shot down by Golide Gumede on 3 September 1978. The aircraft pictured here is the Hunyani, the actual aeroplane shot down on that same day in history by the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army.



© www.rhodesian.com.au

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4. There are several similarities between how Baines and Livingstone meet their wives, spend little time with them, then send them away to wait for them. Focusing on this chapter, write a short paragraph explaining the character of each woman. Support your analysis with quotations from the text. (8)

[illegible]

[15]

Narration and structure

What is the author trying to say? How are we encouraged to react to the ideas presented in the novel? In this section, we examine some of the literary devices, writing techniques and structural elements that the author, Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu, uses to convey the message of her novel.



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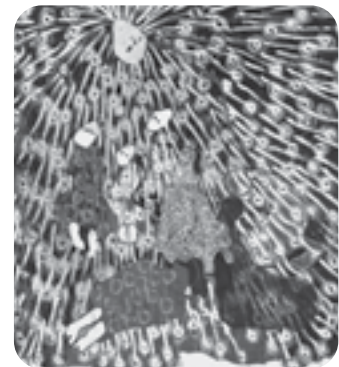
Narration

The third-person omniscient perspective

The Theory of Flight is told from a **third-person omniscient** perspective by a narrator who shifts between the perspectives of various characters. This narrative viewpoint offers the reader insight into the internal emotions, thoughts and reactions of the individual characters. Each chapter is **focalised** by a different character, indicated by the names that form the chapter headings. Each character is provided with a unique voice in the chapters that are focalised by them. The perspectives of Marcus, Vida and Krystle are afforded the most prominence throughout the novel. It is noteworthy that only three short chapters are focalised by Genie – and her perspective is included in only six other chapters – despite her being the protagonist of the story.



When discussing narrative point of view, the **narrative voice** (who is speaking) and the **focalisation** (from whose perspective the story is told) need to be considered; for example, a story which is told in the first person (using the pronoun 'I') is narrated and focalised by the same character. That character is, thus, both the speaker and the person from whose perspective the story is told. A story which is told in the second person is narrated by one character to another character (using the pronoun 'you'), for instance, an author narrating to his or her audience. When a **third-person** narrator has access to the thoughts and feelings of all of the characters and the situations in which they are involved, it is known as omniscient narration (using the pronouns 'he', 'she' and 'they'). When the story is narrated in the third person from the perspective of several central characters, those characters are known as **focalisers**.

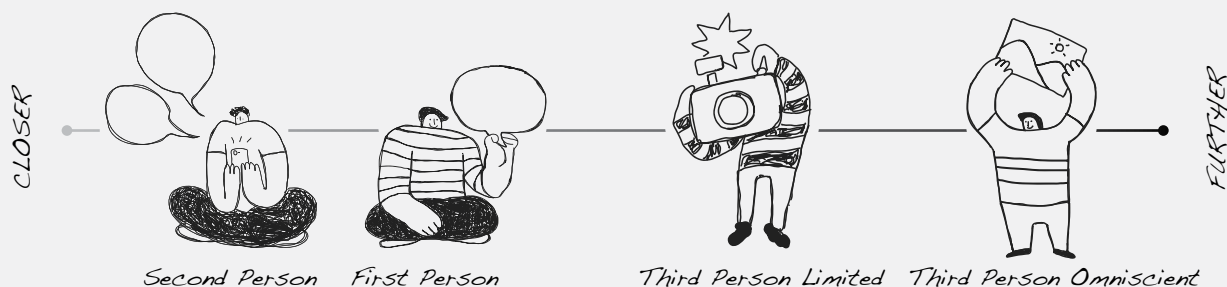


© Portia Zvavahera

Third person narration allows the reader to access the hearts and minds of characters.

The technique of focalising each chapter through a different character allows the reader to experience multiple, often conflicting, perspectives, which helps the reader become comfortable navigating complex, nuanced situations in which there are often no definitively 'right' or 'wrong' answers.

The narrative point of view in terms of 'distance' from the reader



A non-linear narrative

The narrator does not tell these events and stories chronologically, but rather uses a non-linear narrative technique, moving back and forth through place and time. In this type of narrative, the readers at some point know more about what is happening – and what will happen next – than the characters. This technique thus allows opportunity for **dramatic irony**, in which the readers' awareness of a specific situation differs from that of the characters. A clear instance of this divergence between the readers' and the characters' awareness is that the readers know both how and where Genie dies – these details are revealed in the first paragraph. The characters in the story, however, do not know that this will happen. Conversely, what the readers do not know is why and how these events happen – and these questions keep the readers engaged in the plot.



Dramatic irony is a literary technique commonly found in plays, poetry and sometimes novels. It occurs when storytellers create situations in which the audience or reader knows more about the circumstances, conflicts or eventual resolution of the plot than the main characters or actors do. This 'insider knowledge' enables the reader to deduce a deeper significance or layer of meaning in the characters' actions or words.

Storytellers often use dramatic irony to create a sense of unease or state of tension in the reader because this agitation keeps the reader engaged and invested in the plot. Dramatic irony can also be used to create sympathy or empathy for particular characters.

One of the most well-known examples of dramatic irony occurs in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. At the climax of the play, Romeo believes Juliet to be dead, while the audience knows that she is simply drugged and will awake. The incredulous audience has to watch helplessly as the tragedy unfolds and a grief-stricken Romeo commits suicide to join her in death needlessly.



'O happy dagger! / This is thy sheath' (Act 5, Scene 3). Believing her lover, Romeo, to be dead, a distraught Juliet plunges his dagger into her heart.

© EIP2007 (Deviantart)



© Olaf Hajek

The magical realism genre

Other questions that the readers may have could pertain to how believable certain parts of the story are. Indeed, a sense of the fantastic is evident in the first paragraph of the prologue: '[o]n the third of September, not so long ago, something truly wondrous happened on the Beauford Farm and Estate. At the moment of her death, Imogen Zula Nyoni – Genie – was seen to fly away on a giant pair of silver wings, and, at the very same moment, her heart calcified into the most precious and beautiful something the onlookers had ever seen' (p. 9). This fantastic – or fantastical – event does not seem possible. Nor is the fact that Genie hatched from

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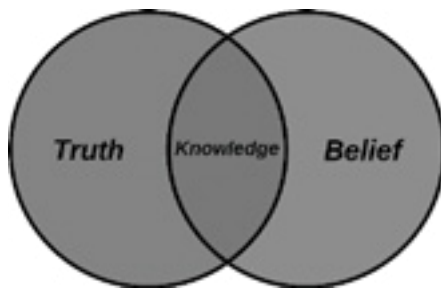


Glossary

Genealogy (p. 9): The tracing of lines of descent (origin) from an ancestor or ancestors.

Teleology (p. 9): The study of phenomena from the perspective of their purposes, goals or 'ends' (as opposed to causes or 'beginnings').

Epistemology (p. 9): The study of the nature, origin and scope of knowledge (as opposed to opinion or belief).



A simplified illustration of Plato's definition of knowledge. The philosopher asserted that there are truths that can be discovered and that these are objective, not relative. If something we believe to be true can be justified or demonstrated to be the case, then it can be classified as knowledge.

a golden egg. Nor is Genie's assertion that her parents 'flew away' (pp. 78, 225) during the attack on Beauford Farm and Estate. Nevertheless, the narrator presents the first event as a truth, and the second two as faithfully capturing Elizabeth's and Genie's respective assertions.

Readers are therefore challenged from the beginning to suspend their disbelief and join the narrator in immersing themselves in the interconnected stories that comprise Genie's life, and to believe in magic at the same time. It is this sense of the 'magical' that results in the classification of the novel as 'magical realism'; however, while the 'magical' is limited to these few instances, 'realistic' may be used to describe the rest of the novel. The narrator uses prosaic – even academic – terms to explain what comprises the story, i.e. **genealogies**, histories, **teleologies**, **epistemologies**, and epidemiologies. These scientific, philosophical and social terms are also used to title sub-sections of the novel.

The title of the novel

The meaning behind the title of the novel is multi-layered. As author Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu observes, 'there are many instances of 'flight' in the novel and there is a play on the idea of 'flight' throughout the story: Baines, Genie's grandfather, has a wanderlust that makes him 'flighty'. He

also has a love of aeroplanes that inspires his son, Livingstone/Golide, not only to draw sketches of planes and build wire models of planes but, eventually, also to build a giant pair of silver wings so that he can transport the woman he loves, Elizabeth, to Nashville, Tennessee to fulfil her desire to be a *bona fide* country-and-western singer. Golide and Elizabeth's daughter, our protagonist, Genie, 'takes flight', that is, flees the Beauford Farm and Estate after the *sojas* with the red berets come; she again 'takes off' when she leaves the Masukus' home and goes to save Jesus/Vida; eventually, she flies away on a giant pair of silver wings when she dies. Various characters, now living in the diaspora, fly in and out of the country via plane. The novel also treats 'flight' as a symbol and metaphor for liberation/self-realisation/freedom. 'The Theory of' part of the title was not a little influenced by the fact that I was a PhD candidate at the time and immersed in theories of all kinds.'



© The Negro (TRICERA ART)

Structure

The prologue

A prologue can be an effective way of establishing tone, introducing key themes, providing background information, and indicating significant events to come. In the case of *The Theory of Flight*, the narrator uses the prologue to create a sense of suspense by **foreshadowing** what will happen to the protagonist, Genie, and to explain why the preliminary chapters weave together the stories of a host of other characters, such as her parents and grandparents. The narrator explains that each character's story is linked to that of the protagonist. In other words, that *Genie's story cannot be told in isolation*: Genie's story is also the story of numerous other characters – of Baines Tikiti and Prudence Ngoma (her grandparents), Golide Gumede and Elizabeth Nyoni (her parents), Dingani Masuku, Thandi Hadebe, Krystle Masuku and Marcus Masuku (her adoptive family), and Valentine Tanaka, 'Jesus', and the Beauford Farm and Estate. While the readers would not know who any of these characters are at first, nor understand the references the narrator makes to a key event in each character's life, each story will be told and, by the end of the novel, readers will understand how these people and events are connected, and why they are important to Genie's story.



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Foreshadowing is a literary device that creates suspense by hinting at, or alluding to, future plot developments and events to come; for example, in *The Dark Knight*, Harvey Dent suggests to Bruce Wayne that 'you either die a hero or live long enough

to see yourself become the villain', which not only foreshadows Harvey's transformation into the villainous Two-Face (pictured) and Batman's cover-up that paints him as a hero after his death, but also Batman's own fluctuating relationship with the people of Gotham City over the course of the trilogy of movies.



'As a reader, when I start reading a prologue, I'm usually impatient to get to chapter one. But by the end of a good prologue, I'm wondering about the subsequent story and excited to see how the event fits into the rest of the plot.'

- MEG LATORRE-SNYDER



The two books*

The story is divided into Book One and Book Two. Book One mostly delineates the past – both the personal and political histories that are part of our characters' lives – and Book Two explores the legacy of those histories on the lives of the cast of characters. To help emphasise the break between past and present, Book One is narrated mostly in the past tense – the only section not told in the past tense is the one titled 'The Present' – and Book Two is narrated in the present tense. In addition, Book One also deals with the circumstances that led to Genie's coma, Book Two deals with the consequences of Genie's coma.

The parts*

Book One and Book Two are further divided into several parts that deal with various ways of remembering, recording and explaining life. Book One has five parts: Genealogy, History, The Present, Teleology, Epidemiology. Book Two has two parts: Epistemology and Revelations. These parts emphasise the interconnected nature of the characters' stories and histories.

The biblical allusions*

Another aspect of the narrative structure is the fact that the first chapter of the novel is titled 'Genesis' and the last is titled 'Revelations' so there is a definite allusion to the Bible. It is left to the reader to make what they will of this.

* Information provided by author Siphiwe Gloria Ndlovu.



Refer to the **Author interview** on page 16 of this resource for further discussion of the narrative and structural choices made by the author.



Zimbabwean artist Gresham Tapiwa Nyaude uses surreal imagery and camouflage patterning to veil the content of his provocative work. Having lived under the rule of the former African strongman [Robert Mugabe] for most of his life, the self-taught artist produces visual interpretations of old tribal proverbs to address contemporary concerns. 'There's no freedom of speech in my country, so I use our Shona tribe sayings metaphorically, and mix in camouflage motifs to further hide the true message,' he told digital magazine, *GARAGE*.

It's illegal to wear camouflage clothing in Zimbabwe, so employing the design system in painting becomes a form of resistance. In his vibrant and psychologically charged paintings, Nyaude weaves body parts, appliances, ladders, and chessboards into coded narratives. And in his recent canvases *The New Zimbabwe* (pictured) and *The Red General*, he depicts the new national leaders – seemingly as corrupt as their predecessors – who emerged in the wake of the country's recent military coup.

- Extract from interview with Gresham Tapiwa Nyaude by Paul Laster, published on www.garage.vice.com



© Gresham Tapiwa Nyaude (First Floor Gallery, Harare)

Liberation through unconditional acceptance

Yet, paradoxically, Vida and Genie also offer each other 'liberation' by 'arm[ing] [themselves] with the knowledge of each other's truth' and 'accept[ing] each other as they were' (p. 165). This type of freedom seems to refer to that which comes with unconditional acceptance between two people. By telling each other everything 'until there was nothing left' (p. 165), there was 'nothing standing between them' (p. 165). In other words, if they held some 'truths' back, it would have prevented them from feeling as though they are known, and still accepted, completely.



© Angu Walters

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, shapes or colours used to represent something else, usually an abstract idea or quality. Symbols usually represent something else by association, resemblance or convention, and provide subtle clues to the deeper layers of meaning in a literary work. There are numerous symbols used in the novel, including aeroplanes, swimming elephants, sunflowers, and the Beauford Farm and Estate. In this section, we examine some of the more prominent symbolism used by Ndlovu in the novel.



© Leslie Carr

Aeroplanes

The aeroplane initially seems to serve as a type of connection between Golide and his father, but then changes after he meets Elizabeth. We are told that '[a]ll those countless hours spent drawing and building model aeroplanes and trying to determine their aerodynamics had not been about trying to bridge the distance that his father had created, but had instead been about preparing himself to be useful in Elizabeth's life in the future' (p. 24). Indeed, the reason he gives Dingani for trying to build his own aeroplane is so he can fly his wife to Nashville, Tennessee (p. 303).

Yet for Golide the aeroplane seems to represent more than this desire

to fulfil Elizabeth's dream. When he proposes the idea of shooting down an aeroplane, it is so that he could 'teach people about how aeroplanes work before the war was over' (p. 25). He wanted them too to believe that they 'were still capable of flight' (p. 24); however, just before he launches the anti-aircraft missile, he watches elephants swim across the Zambezi River. At this moment, he realises that 'he had come up with his theory of flight' (p. 73). As he explains to Bhekithemba, he 'wanted people to know that they were capable of flight, and at first, he had erroneously thought that they would realise this if he taught them how to build aeroplanes. After watching the elephants, he understood that what was needed was merely his



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The House That Jack Built

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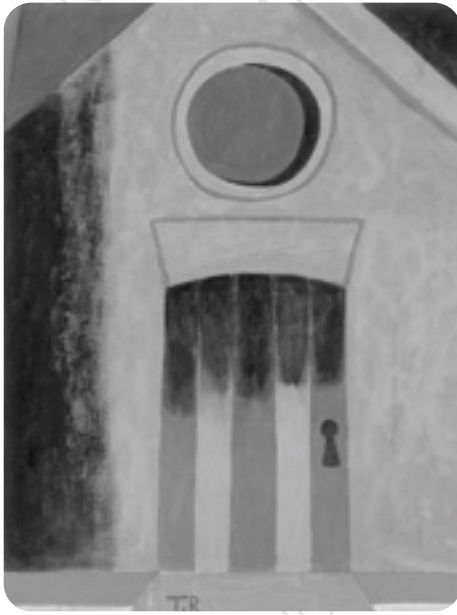
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The House That Jack Built, together with its gardens, is a physical symbol of the colonial era in which it was built. Indeed, it seems it is for that reason that 'members of the Antiquarian Society and members of Victoria's Own, a special branch of the Settler Society's Women's Auxiliary that oversaw the proper implementation of English gardens in the city, had successfully persuaded the City Council to declare The House That Jack Built and Victoria's Garden city treasures' (p. 168). Moreover, the furnishings and personal possessions left in the house perhaps symbolise the structure of the society at that time. Notably, there is little evidence of Frederick and no evidence (aside from the slippers) of Blue in the house, which reflects their status as servants during that era. By contrast, many of Jakob's possessions remain.

The sunflowers

The sunflowers were planted by Bennington Beauford for his daughter Beatrice. Many years later, when Marcus and Genie discover them, Genie too falls in love with them. She sees similarities between herself and the flowers: '[s]he strongly suspected that she had once upon a time been a sunflower, for she too was thin and tall, reaching for the sky; she too had a brown face that was turned up towards the sun; she too loved the gentle sway of the breeze. The only difference between herself and the sunflowers was that they had yellow haloes and hers was reddish-brown like the soil, but differences in life were allowed and to be expected' (p. 191). The narrator also describes Genie 'tak[ing] her rightful place among them' (p. 52) when she buries her toes in the soil. In addition, the sunflower



© Vilva (Deviantart)

Sunflowers appear to symbolise death and regeneration in the novel. '[T]hat after [death] there is life again, that things that perish will rise again, that after every ending there is another beginning' (p.52).

field is the place in which she passes away – the place where she 'choose[s] [her] own ending' (p. 83). The sunflowers may symbolise several things to Genie, such as belonging, peace and safety. That seems to be the case when she imagines her father and her walking through the field, and 'the sunflowers' faces are no longer facing the sun but have turned, each and every one, towards her father and her as they make their way home' (p. 195).

© aimeelikestotakepics (Deviantart)



Genie's suitcase (and its contents)

When Genie arrives at the Masukus, she is carrying a suitcase containing her childhood clothes and Penelope and Specs. Years later, when she leaves the Masukus on her eighteenth birthday, she takes the same possessions with her, even though the clothes now are too small for her and she no

longer plays with those toys. Similarly, when Genie prepares for her death, she packs her suitcase with these possessions, as well as the pair of blue slippers she found at The House That Jack Built. Finally, at Genie's funeral, the suitcase with the same contents has been placed in the coffin in place of Genie's body. The importance of the suitcase and its contents seems to lie in the fact that, with the exception of Blue's slippers, these were probably given to her by her parents. The fact that she arrives with, and then leaves, the Masukus with only these possessions appears to indicate that, for all the years spent with the Masukus, she perhaps did not feel as though she belonged with them.

The suitcase, with its contents from her childhood, can also be seen as a symbol of the transitions in Genie's life – thus, when Genie knows that she is dying, she packs her suitcase for one last metaphorical journey. Vida seems to realise this when he finds the suitcase, which has been packed with the same items, after he takes Genie to hospital (p. 199). Moreover, because there is no body to bury, the suitcase is initially placed in the coffin in her stead, as perhaps it now symbolises Genie for Vida. Before the coffin can be buried, however, Vida retrieves the suitcase, because while '[t]here is courage in letting Genie go [...] [t]here is courage, too, in not letting Genie go entirely' (p. 326).

Beauford Farm and Estate

The Beauford Farm and Estate, while a physical place, also arguably functions as a symbol of the broader changes occurring during this period in the country as a whole. In other words, this piece of land – and its ownership and residents – can be read in terms of the role land plays in understanding belonging. Specifically, when this piece of land is bought and developed by Bennington Beauford, the native residents seem to have lost what agency they had in that they are now expected to work for Bennington as labourers. Then Beatrice takes over, and although her intentions are focused on equality and shared ownership and labour, she is stopped by the colonial government, which is still in power. After independence, Beauford is the site of an attack organised by the state. Then the war veterans take it over in what is perhaps an allusion to land seizures. Finally, at the end of the novel, the land has been sold to The Survivors in an act that is perhaps meant to reveal hope for the future – both for the orphaned Survivors and for the country as a whole. These changes all arguably reflect those occurring throughout the country, as well as the effect these changes have on 'belonging'.



© Jordi Diez Fernandez



The mattress

The mattress seems to serve as a symbol of Vida and Genie's relationship. At first, when the relationship is new, Vida seems to be uncomfortable about publicly buying a new mattress, because of what it may symbolise; for instance, when he and Genie go shopping for a new mattress, Vida notes that 'the simple purchase of a mattress [...] turned into such a production' (p. 172). First, the 'salespeople had given them a knowing look that [he] found presumptuous'

(p. 172). Then, when they are about to go home, Genie decides to stop to buy ingredients for custard, so 'they had driven through the city with the telltale mattress on top of the car' (p. 173). Finally, the mattress seems to distress Marcus when he 'ambush[es]' them (p. 173). Two decades later, however, Genie and Vida's relationship has matured and they are now on their third mattress. Yet when Genie notices her blood on the mattress, she regrets this, as it was Vida's 'favourite mattress' (p. 191) and now he will have to buy another – on his own. The necessary disposal of the final mattress they shared seems to indicate the end of their relationship – and an acknowledgement that Vida will now need to find a way to live without her.

The 'precious and beautiful somethings'

The 'precious and beautiful somethings' are the hearts of Golide's supporters, Genie and quite possibly Elizabeth and Golide. The hopes and beliefs that these people seemed to have in life have 'calcified' (p. 9) into a physical symbol of such after their deaths. It also seems significant that it is the hearts that are transmuted into the 'precious and beautiful somethings', as the heart is often seen as the metaphorical source of emotions such as hope and belief. Moreover, because not everyone has the same definition or perception of what is 'beautiful' and 'precious', avoiding a clear description of what the hearts have actually become thus allows them to be 'precious' and 'beautiful' to everyone. This lack of definition also seems to contribute to the overall feel of the 'magical' in this novel, first by the very fact that this transformation happened, and second by the fact that the 'precious and beautiful somethings' cannot be defined.



© Christian Schloe



© Tamara Natalie Madden

The colourful bird

The colourful bird is first mentioned when Genie hears about the 'discovery of the precious and beautiful something' and she thinks that she 'needs to send a colourful bird to Minenhle and Mordechai' (p. 97). A 'colourful bird' next appears on Vida's chest when he awakens after having taken to the streets again. He takes 'comfort in the knowledge that such a colourful bird exists and that it would feel safe enough with him to land on his chest' (p. 203). A 'colourful bird' is also rescued by Mordechai and Minenhle when it breaks its wing, and Marcus believes that 'there was a bird like [that] on the Beauford Farm and Estate' (p. 265). It seems possible that the bird rescued by Mordechai and Minenhle is the same bird that Vida sees as he notices '[a] broken wing on the mend' (p. 202). It is possible that this bird represents hope, as well as something that is beautiful and fragile but also free – perhaps like Genie.

The world atlas

Genie and Marcus 'borrow [a] world atlas from Marcus's grandfather's scant library' (p. 51), which they then use in their imaginary journeys in Brown Car. Genie sends the same world atlas to Marcus before she dies, which Marcus keeps in a suitcase and appears to keep hidden from his wife, Esme.

For Marcus, this atlas seems to serve as a reminder of Genie, as 'the page he has turned to time and time again' is that with what appears to be Genie's 'small reddish-brown handprint' on it (p. 213). Why Genie sends this atlas to Marcus is not explained. It could perhaps symbolise their childhood friendship, serve as a reminder of their dreams to visit far-away places, some of which Marcus has now seen, or even to remind Marcus of 'home'.

The egg

The egg from which Genie is hatched is described as 'shiny' and 'golden', and small enough to fit into 'the palm of [Elizabeth's] right hand' (p. 15). When Golide launches his anti-aircraft missile, he sees a vision of 'Elizabeth going to the Beauford Farm and Estate carrying a golden egg. The golden egg became too heavy for her and she dropped it. It cracked open



© Salvador Dalí

and a girl emerged. The girl had a gap between her two front teeth' (p. 26). And indeed, Elizabeth arrives at Beauford carrying a golden egg. She later tells Jestina that Genie 'was a golden egg for the five years I carried her. She was a golden egg until the third of September 1978, when she hatched' (p. 40). Eggs are often a symbol of life and rebirth, and this interpretation seems to apply in this novel as well. It does not seem a coincidence that Genie dies on her birthday, especially since, as Genie falls into a coma, she thinks that 'the future has arrived' (p. 196). The impression created is of a cycle of life and death, which is first shown through the lifecycle of the sunflowers.

Vida's pushcart

Vida, with his pushcart, seems to be a regular feature on the streets. The pushcart seems to be both something Vida needs to collect material for his sculptures, as well as a prop Vida can use to appear nothing more than a 'bum [...] collecting stuff for no reason whatsoever' (p. 159). Indeed, Vida 'liked that no one suspected anything when they saw him push his Scania pushcart laden with scrap metal, which he unsuccessfully tried to hide from their view by placing the gently folded quilt his mother had made for him on top' (p. 159). The pushcart thus seems to mirror Vida's life on the street in that it too appears to be one thing (a pushcart perhaps used to collect things 'for no reason') yet conceals a secret (he uses it to pick up and conceal scrap metal for his sculptures). When he saves Genie in his cart, she quite literally seems to banish the illusion that the cart is unimportant and immediately crosses the boundary between Vida's public life and his private – an act that perhaps foreshadows her role in his life later.



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Annotated essay examples

Essay topic 1:

In an essay of approximately 600 words, examine the way in which aeroplanes function as a symbol in Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu's *The Theory of Flight*, commenting particularly on the way in which this symbol develops the central thematic concerns of the novel. [30]



Notes on the essay topic:

- This question requires you to **examine** the symbolic significance of aeroplanes in the novel.
- This analysis should focus specifically on the importance of aeroplanes in developing some of the central themes of the novel.
- Key words include 'examine', 'symbol', 'significance', 'develops' and 'thematic concerns'. You should try to use some of these words in the essay itself.

Essay:

Comments

Introduction

Whether they are being shot down, built or used to travel between countries, aeroplanes represent more than transport vehicles in Sipiwe Gloria Ndlovu's 'The Theory of Flight'. Aeroplanes symbolise the desires and confidence of characters like Golide and Genie, and help develop the central thematic concerns of love, belief and hope in the novel.

Note the structure of the introductory paragraph: the thesis statement is indicated in **bold** (this is the main argument to which we will refer throughout the essay).

Body

Aeroplanes help develop the theme of love through the character Golide Gumede in the novel. Initially, they symbolise his desire to connect with his estranged father, Baines. We are told that Baines has a great love for travel and is fascinated by aeroplanes, which, in turn, stimulates Golide's interest in aeroplanes and flight as a young boy. Years later, after Golide meets Elizabeth Nyoni, his obsession with aeroplanes becomes an expression of his desire to fly his wife to Nashville, Tennessee so that she can pursue her dreams of being a country-and-western singer. We are told that Golide realises 'All those countless hours spent drawing and building model aeroplanes and trying to determine their aerodynamics had not been about trying to bridge the distance that his father had created, but had instead been about preparing himself to be useful in Elizabeth's life in the future' (p. 24).

In the second paragraph, the sentence in **bold** indicates the topic sentence. This is the point with which this paragraph will deal. The quotations and examples from the text support the claim being made by the topic sentence. The underlined sentences form the analysis or elaboration of this point and explain its relevance to the thesis statement. Note how direct quotations can be integrated in different ways; in this paragraph, the quotes are incorporated into the sentence grammatically.

Essay (cont'd):

In the novel, aeroplanes are also central to its thematic examination of the importance and power of belief. When Golide proposes the idea of shooting down an aeroplane, it is so that he could 'teach people about how aeroplanes work before the war was over' (p. 25). He wanted them too to believe that they 'were still capable of flight' (p. 24); however, as he explains the Bhekithemba, '[a]fter watching the elephants, he understood that what was needed was merely his own belief in flight. If people saw him build a giant pair of silver wings, then they too would believe that that they could fly' (p. 73). In this way, the novel explores how centuries of colonisation and oppression had robbed people of the opportunity and confidence to develop the capacity for flight. Genie's unwavering confidence in herself and conviction that her parents 'flew away' (p. 78) can be seen as a metaphor for the power of this belief. As Genie tells Valentine Tanaka during her interrogation, '[y]ou cannot break me. You see, I know for certain that my parents were capable of flight' (p. 257).

Aeroplanes also symbolise the hope and optimism that result from believing in yourself. As Bhekithemba observes, word soon spread of the liberation war hero, Golide, confidently building his silver wings and it inspired awe, 'cultivating a race of angels - followers who believed that they too were capable of flight' (p. 70). This encouragement to believe seems to be reinforced at the end of the novel: as the mourners observe the elephants swimming across the Zambezi, '[o]verhead an aeroplane flies; its silver wings flash in the golden sky' (p. 329).

As well as helping develop the central characters of Golide and Genie and the thematic concerns of love, belief and hope in the novel, aeroplanes are pivotal to the development of the plot. Golide's decision to shoot down the Vickers Viscount aeroplane during the liberation war leads to the attack on the Beauford Farm and Estate and sets in motion the series of events that end up defining the lives of Genie and those around her. 'He could not have known that certain men with a jaundiced sense of justice would draw an undeviating line from the shooting down of the Vickers Viscount and follow it, like a river, to the Beauford Farm and Estate, where their vengeance would flow like an everlasting stream' (p.29).

Comments

Take note of the 'T-E-A' structure of this paragraph (Topic sentence – Evidence – Analysis). The sentence in **bold** is the topic sentence; the quotations and examples provide evidence; and the underlined sentences are the analysis of this point. Providing page references may not be possible in an examination context, but you should still alert your examiner to the fact that you are quoting or paraphrasing from the novel.

Note how this paragraph expands on the points made in the previous paragraph to develop the main argument of the essay.

The concluding paragraph sums up the argument, drawing on words and phrases used in both the question and the introduction. The sentence in **bold** indicates a concluding restatement of the thesis statement.

It is sometimes useful to support your conclusion with a relevant quote from the text.

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Essay topic 2:

Write an essay of approximately 600 words in which you contextualise the following quote and use it as a starting point to discuss the symbolism of the swimming elephants in *The Theory of Flight*, and comment on how the imagery helps to develop some of the thematic concerns in the novel. Refer to the novel closely to substantiate your response. [30]



'You become aware of your place in the world ... You understand that in the grander scheme of things you are but a speck ... a tiny speck ... and that that is enough ... There is freedom ... beauty even, in that kind of knowledge ... It is the kind of knowledge that finally quiets you. It is the kind of knowledge that allows you to fly. You have to experience it for yourself.'



Notes on the essay topic:

- This question requires you to **discuss** the symbolic significance of the swimming elephants in the novel.
- This analysis should focus specifically on the importance of the swimming elephants in developing some of the central themes of the novel.
- Key words include 'discuss', 'symbolism', 'imagery', 'develop' and 'thematic concerns'. You should try to use some of these words in the essay itself.

Essay:

This observation is offered by the narrator at the end of the novel. Immediately after burying Genie's coffin, Marcus is gripped by the sudden urge to see the elephants swimming across the Zambezi River. He leaves the cemetery and heads to the Victoria Falls. To his surprise, the rest of the funeral procession follows him. The group is standing on the riverbank at dawn, watching the elephants swim across, and the narrator notes the hushed wonder and awe with which the scene fills the spectators. By swimming across the Zambezi River, the elephants are doing something seemingly impossible. It is a potentially dangerous thing to do. If the current takes them, the elephants will be swept over the falls to their deaths. Yet it is something that they know, in spite of appearances, that they can do. In this way, the swimming elephants symbolise the power of self-belief and how having confidence in our own abilities can give us the courage to dare - and take that first step.

Comments

Note that the first paragraph describes the context in which the provided quotation appears, as instructed in the question. It then explains the symbolism of the elephants (the underlined sentences) and concludes with the thesis statement or main argument of the essay (indicated in **bold**).

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Essay (cont'd):

As well as appearing at the conclusion of the novel, the swimming elephants emerge from the bush in front of Golide Gumede and inspire him to 'come up with his theory of flight' (p. 73). He realises that '[w]hat had made the first elephant cross was that it could see the other bank of the river [...]. What had made the other elephants follow was the successful passage of the first' (p. 73). Golide realises that he must harness the power of belief and lead by example. Witnessing the elephants inspires him to return to the Beauford Farm and Estate and start building a pair of giant silver wings.

Genie also suggests that her sense of self-belief and bravery were reinforced after she watched the elephants swim across the river. Like her father, Golide, she says that the sight helped her understand 'the possibility of the seemingly impossible' (p. 140). She explains the inspiring, transcendental effect seeing them had on her by telling Marcus that seeing the 'ancient river and the mighty animal in perfect harmony' gave her the 'kind of knowledge that allows you to fly' (p. 140).

As well as being recurring symbols of courage and confidence, the swimming elephants also help to develop the theme of 'transcendental knowledge' or 'the possibility of the seemingly impossible' in the novel. This theme explores the importance of the transcendental or mystical / spiritual dimension in life. The elephants may be interpreted as a symbol of the greater world and, by contrast, the placement of humans in it. The transcendental knowledge that each person is but a very small part of all creation and its history - no more, no less than any other creature - is humbling and liberating. Accepting the impermanence of life 'finally quiets us or frees us to see the aching beauty all around us and to 'fly' (p. 328). In other words, it gives us the courage to live an authentic, deliberate life of our own choosing.

The imagery of the swimming elephants is an important, recurring symbol in the novel. **The elephants appear at crucial points in the plot and inspire courage and determination in both the protagonist, Genie, and her father, Golide.** The unwavering confidence and optimism of these two characters has a significant impact on the people around them and, ultimately, encourages the others to follow their example - to believe in themselves, rekindle their dreams and, as Genie decided, 'to do something good' (p. 240) with their lives.

Comments

Take note of the 'T-E-A' structure of the second paragraph (Topic sentence – Evidence – Analysis). The sentence in **bold** is the topic sentence; the sentence in grey and examples provide the evidence; and the underlined sentences are the analysis of this point.

The third paragraph begins with a topic sentence (indicated in **bold**), followed by the evidence that substantiates it.

The fourth paragraph answers the second part of the question by linking the symbolism of the swimming elephants to the thematic concerns in the novel (indicated in **bold**). Note the use of the connective phrase 'as well as' to link the paragraphs, which helps ensure the logical organisation and progression of the argument. Other connective words include 'also', 'furthermore', 'moreover', 'further to' and 'in addition to'.

The concluding paragraph sums up the argument, drawing on words and phrases used in both the question and the introduction, but restated in an original way. The sentence in **bold** indicates a restatement of the thesis statement.

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