



Characters

Tsotsi

As the leader of a gang, Tsotsi is brutal, unscrupulous, ruthless, and indifferent. He represents the worst of human nature as he is driven by dark impulses. Tsotsi is a cold, merciless killer who stalks his victims with the intention of killing them. Words initially associated with him are synonymous with a predator.

The shock of being separated from his mother during a police raid, and the horror of watching his dog give birth to stillborn puppies before dying, after being brutally kicked by his father, forces him to suppress his memories and change his identity. Changing his name to Tsotsi suppresses not only his memories, but also his morality and his conscience as David. He becomes the leader of a gang who commits heinous crimes, and he creates a code in order to survive.

The light within him is reignited when he takes on the responsibility of the baby. Tsotsi evolves from a hard, uncaring, ruthless thug. His suppressed memories start to resurface, and the three rules start to diminish as he changes back to David.

Morris, whom he initially stalks as a victim, evokes his sympathy when he awakens the memory of his dog in a similar, vulnerable situation. This interaction makes Tsotsi realise that he must value the little things in life in order to become redeemed, and he lets Morris live.

Tsotsi becomes caring and compassionate when he cares for Boston like a mother would. He is able to delve deep within himself, to share his feelings and experiences with Boston, and he has the courage to follow through in his quest for God, after he questions Boston about life and God.

In being openly vulnerable to Isaiah, Tsotsi learns that to gain an understanding of God, he must attend church. Tsotsi feels 'lighter' when he commits to do whatever it takes to pursue his goal of redemption.

He also begins to accept Miriam's kind gestures and no longer relies on threatening behaviour for her to assist him. Their relationship evolves into personal conversations, and to her feeding and caring for him. He begins to trust Miriam, but not enough to leave the baby with her. This trust enables him to open up to her and to also listen to her. Her positivity about her future makes it



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possible for him to realise he can leave his past lifestyle behind. This is the next step in his redemption. Tsotsi's instincts change from violence to humanity, to saving humanity. He sacrifices his own safety for that of the baby, redeeming himself and becoming David again.

Miriam Ngidi

Miriam as a young mother raising her child on her own, is a symbol for all single mothers in apartheid South Africa, like Tsotsi's mom, the baby's mother, and Maxulu. Miriam represents the nurturing, compassionate and caring qualities of mothers. She offers to take the baby as her own, even though she barely has enough for herself and her son. She also cares for Tsotsi, offering him advice and feeding him. Tsotsi is influenced by her positive attitude in redefining her future. She accepts that her husband has died, and she takes on work to support herself and her child and is determined to rise above her circumstances. Tsotsi begins to look at her differently, acknowledging her inner strength. She is a strong, courageous woman who teaches him to move on in life and never give up.

Baby

The baby is a catalyst to Tsotsi's self-discovery and rebirth. His choice to keep the baby rather than abandon it, is contrary to his criminal personality. The baby is a representation of the innocent, protected life he lived with his mother. Subconsciously, caring for the baby could be an attempt to defeat the helplessness he felt when his dog gave birth to still-born puppies. Tsotsi does not have the skills to care for the baby. He is also illiterate as is evident when Cassim tricks him with the milk. Through the baby, Tsotsi learns to be compassionate, caring, nurturing, and responsible. He also learns to reach out for help, although threateningly at first, when he approaches Miriam. The baby evokes feelings of sympathy and mercy in Tsotsi. In an effort to acknowledge his rebirth and baptism, he names the baby David, thus baptising the baby and himself.

Butcher and Die Aap

Butcher and die Aap are symbols for the black men in South Africa during apartheid. They are without identities, using titles that represent a quality. Their purpose is to survive the day as they are unemployed, while those who are employed earn meagre wages that cannot improve the quality of their lives. They both survive through their crimes of violence.



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Butcher is extremely violent and revels in this. Tsotsi does not trust him but uses him for his enthusiasm for crime, lack of emotion and quick response in achieving the ends. He has no respect for human life. and so when he realises that Tsotsi is no longer committed to the gang he leaves without any remorse, to find another gang. Die Aap regards the gang as his 'family'. He participates in the crimes, showing loyalty to the gang, because they are all he knows. The gang provides him with a sense of security and identity. It is through Die Aap that Tsotsi is able to vocalise the termination of the gang. This upsets Die Aap and he leaves, hurt and seemingly lost.

Morris Tshabalala

He was crippled six years ago, in a mineshaft collapse. He not only lost the use of his legs, but he also lost his dignity and is ashamed of having to beg to survive. He is a symbol for the oppressed communities in South Africa. His plight draws attention to the unsafe working conditions of the miners. Also, as a disabled worker there is no care or compensation for him. Tsotsi stalks Morris with the intention of killing him; however, he feels sympathy for him because he reminds him of the 'yellow bitch'. His encounter with Tsotsi transforms Morris from a bitter and disillusioned man to a man who begs for his life. This is symbolic of Morris' rebirth and new hope beyond his life circumstances. He is able to acknowledge the beautiful gifts of nature.

Through Morris, Tsotsi learns the value of life and, learns that he can make the choice to be decent, compassionate and human. This foreshadows Tsotsi's rebirth when he renames himself. Ironically, it also foreshadows his 'spiritual' rebirth, when he dies with a smile on his face.

Boston

He is very knowledgeable, which makes him the "brains" of the gang. He led a promising life. The hope of qualifying as a teacher promised a better life for himself and his mother. An unfortunate incident of misunderstanding ends his dream and leads him to a life of crime in order to survive. He has not been home to his mother because he considers himself a failure, and in not wanting to disappoint his mother, he lies about his life and his career as a teacher. His life as a thug leads him to question his understanding of life, as he grapples with his conscience and a sense of morality. Boston acts as a catalyst for Tsotsi's transformation, and eventually his search for God. Through their interaction,



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Boston helps Tsotsi understand what he must do to seek further redemption, but also realises that he, Boston, must go back home to seek redemption from his mother.

Isaiah

In the bible Isaiah is an 8th century Israelite prophet. This is appropriate because as a 'prophet' he teaches Tsotsi about God. While his understanding of Christianity is questionable, it is his sincerity about his beliefs that gives solace to Tsotsi. Isaiah allows Tsotsi to understand the possibilities that Christianity brings. Tsotsi leaves with an invitation to visit the church and meet God, and this makes him feel hopeful.

Gumboot Dhlamini

He is a migrant worker in the Johannesburg mines. He is a symbol for all absent fathers and for all men whose families do not know their whereabouts: Tsotsi's father whose absence made him a stranger to Tsotsi; Simon whose whereabouts are unknown; Boston and Morris whose families do not know where they are. Dhlamini makes himself an easy target for the gang by his lack of vigilance. His good-naturedness, sense of hope and positivity are snuffed out by his senseless death. His killing is a catalyst to the disintegration of the gang and Tsotsi's transformation. His funeral is symbolic of the lack of closure for families: unknown men buried in unknown graves. It also symbolises the oppression of apartheid that resulted in dehumanising people, and it also questions the essence of spirituality within the representatives of the church.

Adapted from: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/isaiah>
<https://bshaw14.wordpress.com/character-analysis/butcher/>
<https://tsotsi1.wordpress.com/character-analysis/>
<https://www.victoriaparkhigh.com/images/Lockdown/Grade11/Grade11Tsotsinotes.pdf>