



Motifs and Symbols

MOTIFS

Watching: Survival, Redemption, Conflict, Transformation

Initially, Tsotsi watches in order to stay alive. He has to learn how to survive on the streets through watching the behaviour of Petah and his gang. He has to learn to rob and kill without remorse. Tsotsi uses observation to gain superiority over his victims. As a predator, he stalks his victims for moments of weakness and vulnerability to assert his will: Gumboot, Morris and Miriam. While watching Morris, Tsotsi is able to reflect on his current situation. This gives him time to become sympathetic to Morris, which leads to a conversation that results in Tsotsi sparing Morris' life.

Through observing others, Tsotsi transforms himself, adopting their values and beliefs to become human. Through his transformation he regains his identity and 'decency'. While watching Isaiah, Tsotsi thinks about what he wishes to know about God. He patiently waits to get the answers to resolve his internal conflict of defining decency. Through observing Miriam at the water tap he decides that she will be suitable to feed his baby. He stalks her to take advantage of her when she is most vulnerable.

Tsotsi watches to learn to survive, for achieving redemption and for resolving conflicts. As Tsotsi learns more about himself he can find and reconnect with his old self, David.

SYMBOLS

The Dog

The 'dog' is a link to Tsotsi's past. Any references to 'dog' by any of the characters stir elements of discomfort within Tsotsi. The dog represents the warm, loving environment of his home with his mother. Like his pet dog that is badly injured before dying, Tsotsi too, like the dog, is a broken, damaged person within the system of apartheid. He is the product of his mother, from whom he is separated due to the passbook system, and an angry father, recently released from prison. The dog also represents the crippled apartheid system that South Africans were faced with. The dog allows Tsotsi to question the care he can afford the baby, and allows him to consider Morris' biography, and make a decision to let him live.



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Light and Dark

This represents Tsotsi's thinking as he oscillates in his decisions/dilemmas. Dark represents the evil, murderous, ruthless and violent aspects of Tsotsi's character in his attempts to survive in a hostile environment. As Tsotsi evolves in his transformation, more aspects associated with light appear in his life.

Light is the kind, compassionate, caring and thoughtful aspects of Tsotsi's character. Light is shown when Tsotsi decides to let Morris live (they are under the lamp post). It is at night when Tsotsi beats Boston. It is light when Tsotsi confronts Boston two days later, and asks Boston for guidance and an understanding of decency, morality and God – aspects associated with light and enlightenment. Finally when Tsotsi attempts to save the baby, the sun is shining, and he dies with a smile on his face.

Ruins

The ruins represent South Africa and the conditions that the oppressed communities lived in, under Apartheid. Apartheid caused the disintegration of families and destroyed family values. The indigenous people of South Africa were exploited and devalued under apartheid.

Water

Water is a symbol of power for the apartheid government. Withholding of this life force slowly destroys the spirit of the people. When Tsotsi leaves Miriam for the last time, he asks her for water. The baby needs to drink to survive.

Baby

The baby is a symbol of innocence, compassion and unconditional love. The baby is the catalyst for change: he brings about Tsotsi's rebirth and redemption. The baby takes Tsotsi back to when he was David: young, innocent and vulnerable. In attempting to save the baby, he saves himself. Through the baby he recovers his memories and his identity. The baby forces Tsotsi to regain his name, identity and history. Caring for



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the baby also redeems him for his helplessness when his dog gives birth to still-born puppies. The horror of that act immobilised him.

The baby is the catalyst to change Tsotsi back to the person he once was as David. Tsotsi sees himself within the child and it triggers the pursuit of cleansing and redemption within his life. The baby is also Tsotsi. It is what he was when he was David: innocent and kind-hearted. In attempting to save the baby at the end he is actually saving himself from the 'thug life' he was living.

The City/Walking/Running

This represents the labyrinth of Tsotsi's mind. He is lost physically, emotionally and spiritually. He runs away after beating Boston, and he is confused about what he is feeling on his walk back home after encountering Morris.

Isaiah

He represents the link to God. He is pivotal in Tsotsi redeeming himself.

Miriam

Miriam could be a representation of Mother Mary. She is caring and nurturing and shows Tsotsi how to start loving again. She teaches him forgiveness shows him the way forward.

Adapted from: <https://tsotsi1.wordpress.com/motifsymbolism/>

https://www.victoriaparkhigh.com/images/Lockdown/Grade11/Grade_11_Tsotsi_notes.pdf

<https://gifs.africa/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Tsotsi-Study-Guide-Secondary.pdf>