

Themes



Survival

Being oppressed under Apartheid forced people into desperate behaviours to overcome poverty in order to survive. Tsotsi shifts from a physical survival to an emotional and spiritual rebirth. The baby enables him to reclaim his identity as David. Through Morris, he begins to experience empathy. Tsotsi's interaction with Isaiah encourages him to embrace God. Through these interactions, Tsotsi chooses to become selfless, compassionate, and ethical.

Redemption and Mercy

Tsotsi's redemption is achieved through the choices he makes to value life. From taking responsibility for the baby, showing mercy to Morris and caring for Boston, he moves from the dark to the light. Morris reminds Tsotsi that mothers love their children. Boston guides Tsotsi in his search for God, which results in Tsotsi going to the church where he finds Isaiah who tells him about God and warns him against sin. Miriam encourages him to let go of the past. Tsotsi's transformation initiates a change in Boston who decides to face his past and return to his mother. Through his interaction with Tsotsi, Morris is able to vocalise his will to live and to appreciate the goodness in his otherwise dreary life. Miriam is also able to let go of her husband, and focus on rebuilding her life.

Social and Moral Decline

Through the biographies of the characters, the poor socio-economic conditions and moral decline associated with violence and crime, resulting from the poverty in the townships as perpetuated by apartheid, are revealed. Morris and Gumboot as victims, represent men who come from the rural areas in search of work. Tsotsi and the gang members live impoverished lives in the township without any sense of hope. They resort to crime to survive. Tsotsi resorts to a life of violence when, as a little child he is abandoned, when the police arrested his mother for not having a passbook. The people in the townships live in fear of frequent raids. The water point's inconsistency represents the economic and social instability of the black people. The ruins and the threat of demolition show that their lives could be uprooted at any time.

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Abandonment

Tsotsi is forced to live on the streets when, at the age of ten, he adopts a life of crime in order to survive. His abandonment is triggered by a police raid that results in his mother being taken away from him. The baby given to Tsotsi in the bluegum trees is forsaken by its mother. Miriam and her child experience a sense of abandonment by her husband, Simon, as will Maxulu when Dhlamini does not return. Boston's mother experiences a sense of abandonment from a son who does not return home. Their situations are direct consequences of apartheid.

Guilt

Various characters experience a sense of guilt and remorse when, in their search for their personal truth, they question the value of their lives. Boston feels guilt, shame and regret when the gang kills Gumboot Dhlamini. He also experiences a sense of guilt when he revisits his past, and realises the need to be truthful to his mother. Tsotsi later feels guilty after beating up Boston. The Reverend also experiences guilt when he questions his role as a spiritual leader.

Fear

Fear is used as a tool to establish power in a society that has no value. The gang members not only instil fear in their victims, but they also use fear amongst themselves to establish superiority over each other. Boston fears Tsotsi. Morris fears Tsotsi. Tsotsi affirms his identity by the fear he instils in others.

Hope

Through Boston and the baby, who are catalysts for hope in Tsotsi's life, he is able to show mercy to Morris and repent his beating of Boston. He puts the gang behind him and sets out to find God. His talk with Isaiah allows him to hope for a better future and to start making changes in his life.

Decency

Tsotsi beats up Boston because Boston questions his decency, after the killing of Gumboot Dhlamini, a decent person. Senseless violence and premeditated killings cause Tsotsi and his gang to lose their sense of decency. Boston later points out that they have become sick from their lifestyle. Tsotsi's journey is to achieve decency in his life. In allowing Morris to live, Tsotsi attains some decency towards others

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because he recognizes that Morris' life is also valuable. In his journey towards decency, he remembers his life before he chose to be a tsotsi.

Identity: Dark to Light

Tsotsi is without a conscience and is driven by an 'inner darkness' for survival. He shows no remorse in orchestrating Gumboot's murder. He feels no empathy when beating up Boston and when stalking Morris. As the young David Madondo, he blots out his identity associated with his loving mother and his personal history. As Tsotsi he represses disturbing memories of his past as a way of coping. His new identity is forged by his new life's circumstances and by the township gangsters. The baby is a turning point in his life, as it provides Tsotsi an opportunity to rediscover his original, innocent self. In order to recover the young David, he has to discard his inhumane way of life. He reclaims his identity when he says his name out loud, and he reclaims his goodness in the manner in which he greets the milkman.

Religion

The Christian concept of religion can be seen in the representation of the baby as the new-born baby Jesus, because of his innocence, and the redemption and peace he brings to Tsotsi. Miriam represents Mother Mary. She is compassionate, caring and magnanimous, despite her circumstances. She is prepared to take in the baby though she has very little for herself and her child. Gumboot Dhlamini's funeral focuses on the significance of the church in the lives of the oppressed when Reverend Ransome questions his role. Tsotsi is influenced by Boston and Isaiah in his quest for God. He comes to realise that redemption can be achieved through God. Morris's simple appreciation of nature also relates to God. The sequence of events from finding the baby till Tsotsi's death takes place over 3 days. The smile on his face after his death suggests his redemption, and can be symbolic of Christ's resurrection 3 days after his crucifixion. With Tsotsi's death we accept that his soul has been saved.

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

<https://grd11english.wordpress.com/2020/04/03/tsotsi-motifs-symbolism-themes/>

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