

Sizwe Banzi Is Dead Study Guide

Sizwe Banzi Is Dead by Athol Fugard

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Plot Summary

"Sizwe Bansi is Dead" was written by Athol Fugard and coauthored by John Kani and Winston Ntshona, the two actors who originally appeared in the play as Styles and Sizwe Bansi. The world premiere of the play occurred in 1972 at the Space Theatre in Cape Town, South Africa. The play provides a view into the social and political racism experienced by black South Africans in the 1970s, although the type of suppression and persecution depicted in the play was present well before the 1970s and would continue into the future.

"Sizwe Bansi is Dead" tells the story of Styles, an intelligent, capable, and talented man who leaves his job as a factory worker to follow his dream of owning a photography studio. Styles pursues his talent with a camera in order to preserve the faces and identities of his people, who would otherwise be forgotten by the rest of the world. The play also tells the story of Sizwe Bansi, a man condemned by his government to a life of poverty. Although he is willing and capable of work, the stamp in his government issued "passbook" refuses him a work permit and tells him that he must leave Port Elizabeth and return to his hometown of King William's Town where there are no work opportunities. This government edict will, in all probability, result in the starvation of Sizwe and his family. Sizwe is taken in by a man named Buntu after he is discovered in a government raid. Sizwe hopes that Buntu will figure out some way for him to remain in Port Elizabeth and find a job to support his family, but Buntu can read and when he looks at Sizwe's passbook he sees that he is three days past due in his return home. He knows Sizwe has no chance of finding a job or remaining in Port Elizabeth with the stamps in his book. However, Sizwe discovers a passbook belonging to a dead man and, after struggling with his decision to give up his own name, decides to adopt the identity of Robert Zwelinzima. The adoption of this new identity ensures that Sizwe will be able to look for a job and provide for his family.

In the early scenes of the play, Styles's musings are interrupted by the entrance of a man named Robert Zwelinzima, who has come to have his picture taken so that he can send it to his wife and children back home. Over the course of the rest of the play, it is revealed that Robert Zwelinzima is actually Sizwe Bansi living under the new identity he has adopted. Just as Sizwe Bansi is forced to essentially "kill" himself in order to preserve his life and the life of his family, his story illustrates the ghostly existence of the black population of South Africa. They are told who they are, where to live, and how to live, by a book developed and stamped by white men. They are forced to give up their dignity and humanity in order to continue to exist. They are constantly treated as less than human and are certainly never given the respect they deserve. However, Styles's motivation for his photography preserving the faces and memory of his people makes it clear that the taking of Sizwe Bansi's portrait is a moment of hope and triumph. Sizwe Bansi has been forced to alter his name and identity in order to provide for his family, but this photo taken by Styles preserves him forever as both Sizwe Bansi and Robert Zwelinzima. It reveals that he is indeed a human being with an identity and a history. This photo will preserve his name and his life for the generations to come.



The story told in "Sizwe Bansi is Dead" explores the themes of identity, self-worth, racism, and suppression. The passbook that every black man is forced to carry is the foundation for this question of identity. The passbook imposes limits on the employment and travel of all black citizens in South Africa. It takes away their freedom, making them less than men. Their entire lives are contained in this passbook, and with a single stamp one white man can totally alter a black man's future and determine his fate. The characters depicted in the play struggle to maintain their own identities and sense of themselves as human beings under this oppressive rule. Within these circumstances, however, Styles, Sizwe, and Buntu realize that all they own is themselves. The only legacy they have to leave behind is the memory of their lives, so they strive to be the best men they can be and live the best lives they can. They show themselves to be far better men than their white "Baases" because they realize the value of human life and the sacredness of identity.



Part 1

Summary

The play opens in Styles's photographic studio in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth. At the center of the stage is a table and chair and nearby are a camera and tripod. Styles walks onto the stage in a white dust coat and bow tie holding a newspaper. He begins to read and comment on the headlines from the newspaper. Noting a headline about a car plant expansion he remarks that while there is an expansion of the plant, there won't be an expansion in the paychecks of the workers. Styles once worked at Ford Motor Company and read countless headlines about an American or Londoner giving speeches about improving working conditions, but the talk always ended in the paper and there was never any change in payment. He recalls one of his workdays at the Company when one of the Fords actually came for a visit.

One day Mr. Henry Ford Junior arrived to inspect the plant. This was big news because when a big white man visited the plant, there were usually a few more coins in the paycheck at the end of the week. When Styles arrived at the plant, everyone was silent and not one of the machines was moving. The general foreman, "Baas" Bradley, addressed the workers in a heavy Afrikaans accent and told them that they had to clean the plant from top to bottom. The men were told to scrub and clean every nook and cranny of the plant while the Baas stood by and urged them on. The big boss, whom they never saw except when he was on his way to lunch, came out to urge them on and make sure everything was clean. Safety signs that had never been there before were put up all over the plant. As the supervisors were painting a specific phrase of warning on the floor, they required Styles to translate it. Styles relished the fact that the men, his bosses, were all kneeling on the floor while he is standing above them.

Finally, the men were told to clean themselves, and for the first time they were given towels to dry themselves off as well as brand new uniforms and equipment. Styles was given a pair of fireproof gloves, like the ones he had lost a year before. Styles was asked to translate while the boss addressed the workers. He translated the boss's words sarcastically, adding his own meaning as he addressed the men. At one point the boss told the men to sing while they work, and Styles told them to hide their true feelings, smile, and sing the songs of old. The boss told them that they were better than the black population in Harlem, New York; they work hard and their hard work will one day impress the big boss..

The assembly line was started at an unusually slow pace and the men worked leisurely. Suddenly, three long black Galaxies pulled up and a man got out, walked to the door of the plant, and looked around while the bosses began to fawn over him. Shortly after, he got back in his car and drove off. This was extent of the big official visit. The men were made to work harder than ever that day in order to compensate for the leisurely work they had been doing and for the time spent on the general cleaning.



Analysis

This scene reveals the working conditions of the black population of South Africa. They are called “monkeys” by their superiors, and treated as if they are no more than animals. For years they have been working without any warning signs or safety precautions; they have worked without adequate tools that are absolutely necessary to maintaining their safety on the job. They are told to hide their true feelings and be the happy, singing black workers that the big boss wants to see.

The speech in which Styles tells his fellow workers to hide themselves away and present a happy face to their boss is directly linked to his boss’s insistence that they be better than those “monkeys” in Harlem who are always going on strike. This refers back to the Harlem Renaissance, a time in the 1920s and 1930s when literature and art blossomed in the black community of Harlem allowing artists to eloquently express the plight of African Americans. These renaissance men and women were able to express their own thoughts and feelings and show that they were important and valuable members of society. They used their art to let people, both black and white, know about the need for social change. This push for social change continued through the Civil Rights movement and into the 1970s. In the South African boss’s opinion, however, the black inhabitants of Harlem are just “monkeys” who don’t behave properly.

Styles’s instructions to his fellow workers to hide their feelings and wear a mask of smiles creates a direct link to the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, specifically his poem *The Mask*. Dunbar’s writing was extremely influential in the development of the Harlem Renaissance and this poem, especially, had a great impact. In the poem Dunbar says, “We wear the mask that grins and lies, / It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, / This debt we pay to human guile; / With torn and bleeding hearts we smile”. These lines of the poem are clearly and strongly echoed by Styles when he tells his fellow workers to smile and sing the old songs from before the arrival of the white men ; the time before they were forced to endure the indignities and suppression of racism.

Vocabulary

township, subsequent, dapper, buffets, eavesdropping, substantially, canteen, precautions, shift, strike, dignity



Part 2

Summary

Styles recalls his decision to seek out freedom and independence after working a long time for the Ford Motor Company. He also compares himself to a monkey, doing his tricks for the white man because he needed the job desperately. He says, "Out of every twenty-four hours I could only properly call mine the six when I was sleeping" (9). Styles decides to become his own man, to reclaim his own destiny and be his own boss. He has a talent for photography, so he decides that he will own his own photographic studio. Although Styles's father is unable to understand his son's desire to be his own man rather than the "fool" of any white man, he perseveres.

After months swamped in the bureaucracy of the South African government, months of forms, applications, and delayed responses, Styles finally receives permission to own a small room next to a funeral parlor. Excited, he goes to his new office only to discover that it is damaged and decayed. He sweeps it up, gets rid of the cobwebs, and cleans the place until it looks decent. Only then does he realize that it is infested with cockroaches. He buys two cans of a bug killer called "Doom," returns to the studio feeling like a gunslinger, and sprays it all over the room, drenching everything in sight. Styles imagines a general meeting under the floorboards for the cockroaches and imagines their leader telling them all that he recommends inoculation. The fumigation continues while poor Styles sleeps happily and dreams of his new independence. However, when he returns to his studio he discovers that it is still infested. He sprays the Doom again but it doesn't do any good. He tells a friend about his difficulty and the friend gives him a cat, which takes care of the problem.

Styles refers to his photography studio as "a strong room of dreams," in which he is preserving the history of his people. One day a man comes into his studio and tells him exactly how he wants his picture. He tells Styles that he wants to have his picture taken standing and holding a document in front of him. Noticing his excitement and his wonderful smile, Styles asks him what the document is. The man explains that he worked for twenty-two years at a job without a promotion. His boss kept telling him that if he wanted to be promoted he needed a better education. So this man went to school, working for seven years to earn a Standard Six Certificate. However, he says, he is still not done. He says he will continue on until he finally becomes a graduate "self-made."

Analysis

The amount of time and effort it takes for Styles to gain ownership of the room near the funeral parlor illustrates the difficulty of black citizens of South Africa in the 1970s. Although he has the skills, capabilities, and money to start his business, he has to ask the permission of the government; not once, but over and over. In order for a black man to found his own business, he has to not only have a clean record, but he must also be



entirely committed. He must want his business more than anything else, as Styles does. Even then, Styles must face the difficulty of repairing the run-down place he has finally received permission to use as his studio.

After months of paperwork, writing letters, asking questions, and running from office to office, he is given a room in disrepair and inhabited by roaches, but Styles is not the type to get discouraged. He does what needs to be done in order to continue on with the fulfillment of his dreams. For Styles, his studio is a place of dreams, not only for himself but also for his clients. The man who comes to his studio with his certificate of graduation is also working to fulfill his dreams. Styles's photograph becomes an illustration and example of his drive, determination, and pride. Although he has worked long and hard for his certificate, the subject of the photo is still not a graduate and will have to work even longer to become one. Still, he is not discouraged. He is proud of the work he has done and he is ready to continue on, because the work brings him fulfillment and makes him feel like his own man. In a society that tries its best to rid a black man of his pride and deprive him of his identity, this man fights to achieve his dreams and become a self-made man. It is this fight and these dreams that allow him to remember who he is.

Vocabulary

properly, hobby, permission, consideration, sobered, reasonably, condemned, enact, menace, inoculation

Part 3

Summary

For Styles, one of his favorite creations is the family card. He shares the story of a family that came to his studio with at least three generations in tow: twenty-seven people. Styles looks at the grandfather and sees him as “a living symbol of Life” (15). The family has come to the studio for a family portrait because the grandfather has always wanted one. Styles arranges the family and realizes that not one of them is smiling so he urges them to say, “Cheese.” The children are the first to follow his request and smile into his lens. The uncles and aunts follow suit, and finally the grandfather. People on the street who look through the window notice and also respond; even the mourners from the funeral parlor next door wipe away their tears as they join in with the family and say, “Cheese.”

A week later the oldest son returns for the picture, admitting that he almost didn't come to pick it up. He explains that his father died two days after the picture was taken. Styles urges the man to look at the picture and appreciate the time he had with his father. The man looks at the pictures and begins to cry, but eventually, as he looks at his family gathered joyfully around their beloved grandfather, he begins to smile. Styles says, “That's it, brother. Smile! Smile at your father. Smile at the world” (16). Styles envisions the man returning to his home, still filled with mourners, and passing around the photos and smiling.

Styles then relates the story of his own father, who fought in World War II and returned home only to have his uniform, his gun, and his dignity stripped from him at the docks. All Styles has of his father now is a photograph. Interrupting Styles's remembrances, a man walks nervously into the studio. After some hesitation and difficulty, the man gives his name as Robert Zwelinzima. The man says he wants just one card and Styles is disappointed. He is not sure how he wants to be positioned for the picture, so Styles has him sit down, placing some flowers on a table near him. The man draws a Stetson out of a bag and puts it on. Robert says that he is going to send the photograph to his wife back home. As Styles questions Robert about his home and his job he becomes more and more tense. Styles tells him to loosen up and imagine being a baas somewhere. Styles places a map behind Robert as a background, places a cigarette in his hand, and a pipe in the other. He has him cross his legs and smile. After the photo is taken, Styles convinces the man to also take a “movie,” which is a photograph that captures its subject in motion. Robert agrees and Styles replaces the map with a painting of a futuristic city. He gives Robert a walking stick and a newspaper. Robert freezes in mid-stride as Styles takes his picture, a photograph which comes to life and begins to narrate a letter to Robert's wife.



Analysis

If the Grandfather symbolizes life, then Styles provides the eternal preservation of that life. Styles vividly captures the joy of life and family within his photograph, but this is not just a moment of the joy for one family. It is a moment of universal joy. The people on the street join in because they recognize the value of this moment and the value of this multi-generational family. The people in the funeral parlor find comfort amidst their grief and rediscover the importance and happiness of life in their example. This grandfather is dead, but his identity, his life, his dreams, and his power as a human being have been preserved for his entire family. After his death, his sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters can all look at this picture and be inspired by the glory of life's meaning that is depicted there.

The story of Styles's father serves to illustrate the inhumanity and cruelty of racism and subjugation. Here is a man who has fought bravely around the world to defend the freedom of other people and now he returns home to have his own stripped away from him. Styles's father was needed for a moment, but this necessity did not result in appreciation of his value. Just as Styles is simply another pair of hands in the factory, his father was just another pair of hands holding a gun. In the text, the word "Free" is capitalized to illustrate its importance and its value to Styles as a dream and a goal.

Styles's positioning of Robert in front of a map with his legs crossed creates a vision of him as a powerful man. The background of a map of the world is a typical background in royal portraits, and it brings to mind the famous Armada portrait of Queen Elizabeth I of England in which she holds a globe in her hand. The background of the map suggests the dominance of the photographic subject. Styles's picture suggests that the world belongs to Robert with all of its possibilities for fulfillment, achievement, and greatness. The second photograph presents Robert as a wealthy man of leisure. He is strolling through the city streets as if he owns them. His decorative walking stick suggests wealth while his newspaper suggests education and involvement in the world.

Vocabulary

dignity, weather-beaten, symbol, graphic, enactment, variations, timid, dignity, hesitant, uncertain



Part 4

Summary

In his letter home, Sizwe tells his wife that he, in a manner of speaking, is dead. He tells her about how he is looking for a job, which is difficult because Port Elizabeth is a large place; many men have arrived looking for jobs due to the scarcity of jobs in other places. He tells her about how he was discovered in a raid and how a stamp saying that he had to return home was put in his passbook, so he went to stay with a friend of a friend named Buntu.

The scene transfers to Buntu's house, where Sizwe meets Buntu. Buntu asks Sizwe about his trouble and Sizwe explains that he has no permit to stay in Port Elizabeth and that his home is King William's Town. Buntu asks Sizwe how he was discovered by the government and Sizwe explains that the headman found him in Zola's house during a raid. Sizwe tells Buntu that he was taken to the Labour Bureau and made to stand in the hall before he was led to an office and made to stand in the door. A white man with a pink record card entered the room, where the card was stamped by another man. Buntu asks to see Sizwe's passbook and realizes that he was required to report in King William's Town the day before. Sizwe cannot read and had no idea that he was supposed to return home. When Sizwe suggests simply getting a new book, Buntu calls him crazy and narrates the extensive bureaucratic process he would have to go through just so he could be told the same thing.

Sizwe says that he will look for jobs in the garden, but Buntu tells him that he has to know how to read and know about seasons and flowers. Buntu asks Sizwe if there is any white man who would be prepared to give him a job, but Sizwe replies that he doesn't know any white men. Buntu says it is a pity, as a white man could have endorsed Sizwe which, after a long exchange of letters between the branches of government in Port Elizabeth and King William's Town, would result in permission to look for a job. Sizwe suggests starting his own business by borrowing money, but Buntu tells him that no one would be willing to lend him money with the restrictions on his passbook. Buntu tells him that there is nothing that can be done; this is not the first time something like this has happened. He advises Sizwe to return home and work in the mines, but Sizwe objects to working in the mines because many men die in there. Buntu looks at Sizwe as if for the first time, after he says that he doesn't want to die. Buntu begins to question Sizwe and discovers that he has a wife and children. Sizwe points out that there are no jobs in King William's Town, and Buntu empathizes, complaining about the trouble he had finding the right stamps, a decent job, and a decent house.

Sizwe asks why there is so much trouble finding work and Buntu tells the story of a man whose funeral he recently attended. He says the man, Outa Jacob, lived a difficult life. He worked on a farm until the boss decided he didn't like him and made him and his wife leave. Jacob worked at another job, but there was difficulty between the boss's wife



and his own wife and he had to move his family once more. On and on Jacob went, looking for work to support his family and living by the whim of white men. The lay preacher's sermon at his funeral talked about how Outa Jacob was finally Home. Now he was out of the reach of the white men and his difficulty and struggle had finally ended. Buntu states that the only time black men find peace is when they are dead.

Analysis

Sizwe's letter to his wife illustrates the motivation for his efforts and the photos he is having Styles take. It also serves as a transfer from the scene of Styles's studio to the events that led to Sizwe's presence there. As Sizwe tells Buntu about his current position and his search for a job, it becomes obvious that this is a story that Buntu has heard many times. The indignities black citizens suffer and the power the white man has over their lives is staggering. Sizwe is forced to stand around for hours with people staring at him disapprovingly just to be told that he has to go back home. He has absolutely no choices in the direction of his own life. He needs the permission of not just one, but a multitude of white men in order to look for a job, simply to support his family.

The story of Outa Jacob serves as an illustration of all of South African black men's lives. His story is one of constant struggle and defeat. His story is also one of strength and determination in the face of prejudice, hatred, and oppression. As Outa Jacob carries the burden of his family around with him while he looks for work, it is obvious that he works hard for their benefit. He is a man who knows where the real value of the world lies and understands what is important. When he loses one job, he simply goes on to another, and when he cannot find one he continues to look no matter what; it is important to him to support his family and keep them together. The only time that Outa Jacob is able to find a bit of peace is when he is dead and in a place of eternal rest; beyond the reach of the white men who once ruled his life.

Vocabulary

continuation, preceding, perch, permit, hesitation, illiterate, produce, influx, endorsed, fetches, gesture



Part 5

Summary

Buntu invites Sizwe to go with him to “Sky’s Place.” Sizwe continues his letter to Nowetu as he describes Sky’s Place. He tells his wife that it is a place where he is treated with respect: an unprecedented experience. As he sits in Sky’s Place with all the most important people of New Brighton, he is called Mister Bansi, something that fills him with the elation of someone whose value has been recognized. As Sizwe stands up from behind his writing desk he begins to address the audience, asking them if they recognize him. He introduces himself as Mister Bansi.

The scene alters and Sizwe stands on the street outside of Sky’s and calls Mr. Buntu. Mr. Buntu joins him and as they reminisce about the fun they had, Buntu makes the mistake of calling him Sizwe. Sizwe insists that Buntu call him Mister Bansi. Buntu laughingly apologizes and accepts. They recall the people they met in Sky’s, particularly a man in the bar; a Member of the Advisory Board who asked Sizwe what he thought about Ciskeian Independence. Sizwe tells Buntu that this kind of false independence is shit.

Sizwe attempts to lead Buntu home and Buntu provides Sizwe with directions, maintaining the illusion that Sizwe is leading him. When Sizwe begins to walk in the wrong direction, Buntu says that he will take over but asks Sizwe to wait because he has to go to pee. He ducks into an alley but quickly returns, warning Sizwe of trouble. There is a body in the alley that Buntu mistook for a pile of rubbish while he was relieving himself. Buntu encourages Sizwe to hurry and leave before anyone sees them, but Sizwe wants to report the body to the police. Buntu objects, insisting that the police will think that they killed the man. Sizwe then proposes that they carry the body home by finding the address in his passbook.

Buntu returns to the alley and retrieves the man’s passbook. Buntu notices that the dead man had a work-seeker’s permit and then realizes that the dead man lived in a bad part of town. Buntu refuses to go any further with the plan for returning the man to his home. Sizwe questions him about it and Buntu says that the Single Men’s Quarters is a concentration camp, with rows of things that look like train cars with six doors each and twelve people behind each door. In response to Buntu’s continued refusal, Sizwe asks him what he would do if the dead man was a friend, if the dead man was him. Sizwe says he wishes he was dead because he doesn’t care about anything anymore. He wonders what is happening to the world. Who cares for anyone? What is wrong with him that he is not treated like a man? Buntu demands to see Sizwe’s book and tells him that they need to return home.



Analysis

For the first time in his life, Sizwe is treated with respect when he goes to Sky's. There he is treated like a man, like a human being with intrinsic value. Sizwe is intoxicated as much by the experience of being on an equal footing with the white men as he is by the drinks he has consumed. He is delighted by being addressed as Mister, for once, rather than boy.

Ciskeian Independence refers to a territory set aside for black citizens of South Africa as a part of the political policy of apartheid. After the man from the Advisory Board questions Sizwe about his thoughts on this issue, Sizwe condemns his illusion of independence because the rights and autonomy of the black population of Ciskei are still nonexistent even as they are promised a life independent from the rest of South Africa.

Sizwe's determination to honor the dead man they discover by reporting his death or returning him to his home reveals his feeling that the black community, and the world as a whole, should be united in brotherhood. His idea is that everyone should help one another along rather than oppressing and persecuting people for their skin color. His insistence on his own identity as a man and human being echoes the words of Shylock, the Jew, in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Like Sizwe, Shylock is persecuted for his race and addresses his persecutors, asking why his validity as a human being cannot be recognized.

Vocabulary

amiable, talkative, influence, clumsy, dignity, sheepish, uncertain, urgent, desperate, reference



Part 6

Summary

As Sizwe watches, Buntu switches out the pictures in his passbook with the passbook of the dead man. Sizwe realizes what he is doing and objects, but Buntu tells him that it is his only chance. Sizwe says he cannot accept another man's name because then he will no longer exist. Buntu assures him that this new book will ensure his stay in Port Elizabeth and allow him to look for a job. Sizwe objects again, and Buntu reminds him that otherwise he will have to return home where there are no jobs. Buntu reminds Sizwe of his wife and children. Sizwe says his children share his name, and Buntu asks him if he is more concerned about his children or about himself and his name. He insists that by taking the dead man's name Sizwe will have a real chance to provide for his family.

Sizwe worries about living as another man's ghost; Buntu then asks him if Sizwe Bansi isn't a ghost, and if subjugation to white men doesn't make him a ghost. Buntu reminds Sizwe of the indignities they are forced to suffer and encourages Sizwe to become a real ghost in order to use the oppressors' ways against them. Buntu outlines all of the benefits, such as the jobs and money Sizwe will have access to with his new name. As he narrates the coming days and Sizwe's predicted good fortune, Buntu makes him respond to the name Robert Zwelinzima, the name on the dead man's passbook. After convincing him to comply, Buntu has Sizwe memorize his new Native Identity number, repeat his personal information, and practice responding to the name Robert Zwelinzima.

Sizwe agrees to the change of identity as Buntu convinces him it's the only way for him to stay alive. The newly reborn Robert Zwelinzima responds that Sizwe Bansi is dead. Buntu says he would stoop to the same if he had this opportunity to provide for his wife and child. He tells his friend that if he were on his own, he might make a stand for his pride, but if he had a wife and children wasting away their lives in the "dust and poverty of Ciskeian Independence," he would do everything he could to support them. Buntu asserts that Sizwe that he can take his name back if he wants to or if he thinks it makes him a man, but the next time a white man calls him "boy" he can't lick the baas's boots and bluff himself into thinking he's a man. Buntu recalls a hat his father used to have that no one was able to touch; he wore it only on Sundays as a sign of his dignity and respect. However,

if a white man stopped and shouted at him to come over, he crumpled his hat in his hand and adopted a servile position. Buntu insists that this is neither pride nor life.

Buntu tells Sizwe that if ghosts exist, the spirit of the man in the alley is smiling right now because he has been able to do something for a fellow man and is wishing Sizwe good luck. Buntu tells Sizwe to stay out of trouble and Sizwe retorts that their skin color is trouble. Sizwe picks up his passbook and turns to finish the letter to his wife. He



assures her that he will come home for Christmas and that he is working to get a lodger's permit so that he can get a home. As he finishes the letter, the scene changes once again and he is in Styles's studio, posing with his walking stick, newspaper, and pipe. Styles tells Robert to hold still and smile.

Analysis

Sizwe's decision to take on the identity of the dead man is foreshadowed by his speech to Buntu in the alley, where he says he no longer cares or wants to live. Buntu's argument that Sizwe should take on the identity of the dead man because he is already a ghost rings true. His life is devoid of anything about which he can feel pride, so he is unable to pretend that his name contains any kind of value or dignity. A life of servile posturing and false smiles in the midst of hatred, racism, and oppression is not a life at all. Sizwe takes on the identity of Robert Zwelinzima so that he can live, and in his adoption of this identity, Robert Zwelinzima is given new life.

The story of Buntu's father's hat mirrors the Stetson that Sizwe wears in his first photo with Styles. While Buntu's father crumpled his hat in his hand in order to appear appropriately servile at the demands of a white man, Sizwe now wears a hat in a declaration of his dignity and value as a human being. In taking on the identity of Robert Zwelinzima, Sizwe is finally able to express his own identity as a husband, a father, and a man. For Sizwe, the time of sacrifice is over, and the time of dreaming has begun. He is a symbol of perseverance, goodness, love, and friendship. Like the grandfather from Styles's family portrait, Sizwe is a symbol of Life.

Vocabulary

muttering, produce, dab, alarm, emphatically, escort, uncertainly, frequently, lest, impassive, poverty



Characters

Styles

Styles lives in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, and used to work at the Ford Motor Company. He now owns a photography studio where he is his own boss and uses his photography skills to preserve the faces and memories of his people. Styles serves as the historical reference for the play as he narrates the details of the cultural environment of South Africa in the 1970s.

Sizwe Bansi

The protagonist of the play, Sizwe has a wife and four children in King William's Town and has come to Port Elizabeth to look for work. His request for an official permit is denied and he is told to return home. Sizwe is able to switch his papers for the papers of a dead man and take on the dead man's identity so that he will be able to find a job and support his family. He goes to Styles to take his picture in order to make his new identity as Robert Zwelinzima more real.

Buntu

Buntu lives in Port Elizabeth and takes Sizwe in when he has nowhere else to go. When they discover the dead body, it is Buntu who first has the idea of claiming the dead man's identity, and it is Buntu who convinces Sizwe to become Robert Zwelinzima.

Nowetu

Nowetu is the wife of Sizwe Bansi and mother of his four children. Nowetu is not in the play, but her presence is felt in the letters that Sizwe writes to her and in his motivation to find a job. It is the thought of Nowetu and his children that compels Sizwe to become Robert Zwelinzima.



Objects/Places

South Africa in the 1970s

Apartheid was a system of racial segregation enforced by the South African government from 1948-1994. Political representation for the black population of South Africa was abolished in 1970. The black population lost their rights of national citizenship, and the schools, hospitals, beaches, and public service programs were segregated.

Port Elizabeth

Forced relocation of the black population within the city began in 1962 in Port Elizabeth, which is one of the largest cities in South Africa. Relocation ended in 1975, but the segregation of the city would last for much longer. Port Elizabeth is also the location of South Africa's automotive industry and is home to several prominent vehicle plants.

Cards

Cards is the term Styles uses to refer to his photographs. Styles views his cards as a way to preserve the faces, culture, and people of the black population in South Africa.

Doom

Doom is the bug killer that Styles spends his precious money on to rid his photography studio of roaches. The bug killer doesn't work and Styles ends up having to get a cat.

Camera

His skill with a camera gives Styles the opportunity to earn his freedom and become his own boss. Through the viewfinder of his camera, he captures the lives and dreams of his people.

Stetson

A Stetson is the brand of hat that Sizwe wears to have his picture taken. This hat evokes the symbolism of Buntu's father's hat that he wore on Sundays.



King William's Town

King William's Town is the home of Sizwe Bansi and his family. Knowing that there are no job opportunities and therefore no way to support his family, Sizwe refuses to go back to King William's Town when he is instructed to return by the government.

Passbook

A passbook is the small book that is given to the black population of South Africa that works like a passport and keeps a record of where they have been and where they are allowed to go.

Sky's Place

Sky's Place is the bar that Buntu and Sizwe go to where Sizwe is thrilled to be called Mister Bansi. It is after they leave Sky's that they discover the body of Robert.

Single Men's Quarters

Single Men's Quarters is the dangerous part of town where Buntu refuses to go. It is occupied by single black men who live twelve to each railroad car.

Themes

Identity

The central theme of “Sizwe Bansi” is Dead is identity. Identity plays a different role in each of the main character’s lives. For Styles, identity is something that he makes for himself. He is able to forge a new identity for himself as a photographer after his dissatisfaction with his labor as a factory worker. He feels that he is treated as less than a man at his job, so he quits and makes himself into a man. Through his work as a photographer, Styles does the same for other people. Through the lens of his camera, Styles captures and preserves the identities of his patrons. He allows their memories to live on.

Styles identifies the most important things to men like him as identity and memory. The black citizens of South Africa in the 1970s have nothing that they own other than their identities and the memories they leave behind. Through his photographs, Styles is preserving both their identities and their memories and giving them opportunities to be themselves, to be real men, if only for a moment.

For Sizwe Bansi, identity is something that is delicate and easily threatened. He is afraid to take on the new identity of Robert Zwelinzima because he is afraid that he will be lost. His identity is tied to everything about him, from his passbook to his name. Although his passbook works as a tool of oppression, he is unwilling to give it up because it represents who he is. It is only when he realizes that identity is something indelible and deep within the soul of a man that he is able to discard his name. Sizwe’s realization that his identity is his own and cannot be touched by the manipulations, suppression, or cruelty of others is the climax of the play. It is the meaning behind the entire narrative. A man is a man and no amount of indignities can strip away his soul and his identity.

Dreams

Dreams sustain the men of the play. Dreams also sustain the entire black population of South Africa in the 1970s. The theme of dreams in the midst of oppression inevitably conjures the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King was a man who dreamed of equality and fraternity in the midst of an imperfect world characterized by racism, oppression, and hatred. In the text, Styles understands that you cannot interfere with a man’s dream. A man’s dream is his essence; it is the thing that keeps him going in the face of obstacles and difficulty. Dreams are what allow a man to maintain his identity even when everyone around him attempts to take it from him. So Styles allows his subjects to take their pictures sitting or standing, alone or with their family, with cities of the future or maps of the world in the background. Because Styles’s pictures depict the dreams of men, his photos capture the happiest moments of life: achievements, family unity, accomplishment, or the discovery of true worth. His camera captures the dreams



of a generation so that they will be preserved to inspire a new generation to see them fulfilled and carry them on.

Existentialism

Existentialism is an important, underlying theme in the play. Existentialism is a philosophy that views human existence as unexplainable; therefore, the meaning of identity and the meaning of existence are determined by the actions and choices of a person. In a world that is at times meaningless, confusing, and absurd, it is up to the individual to give his or her life meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. Styles and Sizwe live in a world that affords their lives no meaning, value, or importance. Men like them are used for their hands in factories and in wars, but they are never recognized as human beings. These men must choose to find meaning, value, and importance within themselves and create it in their own lives. Their self-worth, therefore, is determined within their own minds: they are self-made men. Styles fights for his fulfillment and is finally able to open his own photography studio. Sizwe realizes his purpose lies in the preservation of his family and life rather than the preservation of his name. He realizes that his identity is found within himself, not in his name or his passbook. It is something deeper than that, something of marvelous value, and he must choose to preserve and pursue it any way he can.

Style

Point of View

Because it is a play, the entire narrative is told with an overarching third-person viewpoint. However, the individual narratives are told in a first-person point of view by Styles and Sizwe. Styles is introduced in the beginning of the play and he takes over the story with a series of first-person narratives. After Sizwe walks into Styles's photography studio, Sizwe takes over the narrative of the play with a first-person account of his history and the events of his finding and taking the passbook of Robert Zwelinzima. The story concludes by returning to Sizwe's presence in Styles's studio and the events are narrated in a third-person style with a view incorporating both men.

Setting

The setting of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* is the town of New Brighton in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. The year is 1972. The opening scenes of the play take place in the photography studio of a man named Styles. The middle portion of the play takes place in Buntu's house where Sizwe has gone to seek asylum after he has been told by the police to go home. Sizwe and Buntu go to a bar near Buntu's house and then go out onto the streets of New Brighton during their walk home. These locations are very select and limited. As black men, the characters are only allowed in very specific parts of the town. There are also references to Harlem in the book, which is a neighborhood in New York City that hosted the Harlem Renaissance, a time of revolutionary development in art, literature, and business within the African American community.

Language and Meaning

The language of the different characters varies widely and serves to underscore the differences in their personalities. The events narrated by both Styles and Sizwe are typified by a stream-of-consciousness style that allows them to follow their thoughts to various stories that illustrate the lives of black South Africans in the 1970s. This narrative style highlights their lack of formal education in the literary field and also suggests the influence of the strong oral traditions typical of illiterate societies. Styles can read, but Sizwe cannot. Sizwe is a simple man who just wants to find a job that will allow him to provide for his family. Like most oppressed members of society, he has dreams but they are simple and concrete. Following this characterization, the events narrated by Sizwe are simplistically structured and the language is to the point. In contrast, Styles's narrative is characterized by sarcasm and elements of the absurd. It ridicules the superior attitude and position of the white men around him when he satirizes his translation for the "Baas." The rest of his narrative is also peppered with sarcasm and moments of poetic eloquence. Styles is a man who realizes the absurdity of the treatment of the black population of South Africa. He is a man with great

capabilities, great dreams, and great intelligence. His narrative style of alternating humorist satire and profound eloquence illustrates his character.

Structure

The play does not include separate acts, although it includes multiple scenes. While the play can be divided into several parts, there are three broad divisions within the narrative of the play. The beginning of the play serves as an introduction to the political, social, and economic backgrounds of the black population of South Africa. The stories told by Styles also create a first-person account of the experiences of black factory workers during the 1970s. These stories are representative of the experiences of the general black population during this time as they experienced racial suppression and prejudice throughout society. The second part of the play uses a flashback-type of narrative as Sizwe tells Buntu about his past and the government raid in which he was discovered. This part of the play serves to develop the realization that Sizwe is out of options and that his passbook is his doom. According to his passbook, Sizwe will have to return to King William's Town, where he will be forced to live in poverty because there are no job opportunities. The third part of the play is the climax: the discovery of the dead man's passbook. This part of the play develops the final resolution of the story in which Sizwe adopts the identity of Robert Zwelinzima in order to ensure his future and the future of his family.

Quotes

Hey! That was my moment, man. Kneeling there on the floor...foreman, general foreman, plant supervisor, plant manager...and Styles? Standing!

Hide your true feelings, brothers. You must sing. The joyous songs of the days of old before we had fools like this one next to me to worry about.

Daddy, if I could stand on my own two feet and not be somebody else's tool, I'd have some respect for myself. I'd be a man.

This is a strong room of dreams. The dreamers? My people. The simple people, who you never find mentioned in the history books, who never get statues erected to them, or monuments commemorating their great deeds.

You must understand one thing. We own nothing except ourselves. This world and its laws, allows us nothing, except ourselves.

He fought in France so that this country and all the others could stay Free. When he came back they stripped him at the docks--his gun, his uniform, the dignity they'd allowed him for a few mad years because the world needed men to fight and be ready to sacrifice themselves for something called Freedom.

Now at last it's over. No matter how hard-arsed the boer on this farm wants to be, he cannot move Outa Jacob. He has reached Home.

Do you know who I am, friend? Take my hand, friend. Take my hand. I am Mister Bansi, friend.

They never told us it would be like that when they introduced it. They said: Book of Life! Your friend! You'll never get lost! They told us lies.

What's wrong with me? I'm a man. I've got eyes to see. I've got ears to listen when people talk. I've got a head to think good things. What's wrong with me?

Understand me, brother, I'm not saying that pride isn't a way for us. What I'm saying is shit on our pride if we only bluff ourselves that we are men.



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What was going on in South Africa in 1972? What effect would the events of this time have had on the author of this play? What effect would these events have had on the characters of the play? Are these events explicit in the development of the story and characters?

Topic 2

What role do dreams play in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*? Is Styles's dream fulfilled by his ownership of the photography studio? What does the photography studio represent to Styles? What are some of the dreams of the other characters? Are they fulfilled?

Topic 3

What does Styles say his photographs represent? What do they mean to his clients? What do they mean to the black population of South Africa?

Topic 4

Why is Styles so interested in "Robert" from the beginning? What do the compositions of "Robert's" photographs imply? Why does "Robert" want to have his photo taken?

Topic 5

What do the passbooks in the play symbolize? What role do they play in the development of the plot? Why is Sizwe Bansi unwilling to give up his passbook at first?

Topic 6

What is absurdism? What are some elements of absurdism in the play?

Topic 7

What role does Sizwe Bansi's family play in the story? What are some other instances where family is mentioned? What kind of picture of family is developed through the story of the play?

Topic 8

What does the exchange of Sizwe Bansi's identity for the identity of Robert Zwelinzima mean? What does it imply about the concept of identity? What does it imply about the identities of the black population of South Africa in the 1970s?