SECTION A: ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

6. **MOTHO KE MOTHO KA BATHO BABANG**

(A Person is a Person Because of Other People)

By holding my mirror out of the window I see
Clear to the end of the passage.
There’s a person down there.
A prisoner polishing a doorhandle.
In the mirror I see him
My face in the mirror,
I see the fingertips of his free hand
Bunch together, as if to make
An object the size of a badge
Which travels up to his forehead
The place of an imaginary cap.

(This means: A warder)

Two fingers are extended in a vee
Andwiggle like two antennae.

(He’s being watched.)

A finger of his free hand makes a watch-hand’s arc
On the wrist of his polishing arm without
Disrupting the slow-slow rhythm of his work.

(Later. Maybe later we can speak.)

Hey! Wat maak jy daar?
— a voice from around the corner.

No. Just polishing baas.
He turns back to me, now watch
His free hand, the talkative one,
Slips quietly behind

— Strength brother, it says,

In my mirror,

A black fist

| DICTION |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| **WORD**        | **MEANING**                                                   |
| **TITLE**       | A Person is a Person Because of Other People                 |
| Line 8  — bunch together | fingers move close together to form a tight grip              |
| Line 9  — badge | cloth bearing a design or words, worn to identify a person or to indicate membership of an organization e.g. police force. |
THE POET
Jeremy Cronin is one of South Africa’s best-known poets, whose work ranges from powerful political witness to beautiful love poetry. Cronin was born in Durban and grew up in Cape Town. He studied literature and philosophy at the University of Cape Town (UCT), where he became a Marxist and was recruited into the South African Communist Party, then a banned organisation. He studied in France and returned to South Africa to lecture in the philosophy department at UCT. He continued his work in the struggle against apartheid and in 1976 was arrested and sentenced to seven years in prison. While he was in prison, his wife died and he was not allowed to attend her funeral. He wrote a lot of poetry during his years in prison, including ‘Motho Ke Motho Ka Batho Babang’. He had to smuggle his poetry out of the prison or memorise it and record it when he was freed. He left prison in 1983 and continued his work as a political activist. Cronin was forced to flee the country in 1987 with his second wife and baby boy and they lived in exile in London and Lusaka. He returned to South Africa in 1990 and became an ANC member of parliament, and later a deputy minister in the Cabinet.

TITLE
شروط
The title refers to a well-known African philosophy: Ubuntu – the connectedness that exists or should exist between people and the need for human kindness.
شروط
The title suggests that one needs other people to have an identity, to be recognised or seen by others, and that there is great support in being part of a group.
شروط
In prison, a person needs companionship. Here, he knows he is not completely isolated, that he can rely on others to give him strength to cope with his situation and to keep him human.
شروط
The prisoners who are isolated from each other in their cells, find ways to communicate with and support each other in order to maintain their humanity in an inhumane situation.
شروط
The title records the value and importance of others to provide group strength.

TYPE AND FORM
شروط
The poet uses free verse without any rhyme scheme or rhythm.
شروط
There are many examples of enjambment, where the line runs on to the next line without any pause. This creates a smooth flow, as if the speaker is talking to the reader.
شروط
The visual layout of the poem is important.
- The meaning of the messages that the other prisoner is communicating are placed on the right side of the page, to set them apart from the speaker’s description of what he sees.
- The warder’s words to the other prisoner are in the middle of the page, emphasising that the warder is not part of the same conversation that the two prisoners are having.
• The warder’s direct speech and the prisoner’s silent messages are both shown in italics.

THEME

➢ The theme of Ubuntu: As the title suggests, the theme of the poem is that we can only live a truly human life if we are connected to and interacting with other humans.
➢ It is just as important to have contact with like-minded humans – the prisoners got strength and support from their fellow prisoners, not from the warders.
➢ Any human endeavour, whether it is a political struggle or an everyday activity, is made easier and more meaningful by the support and encouragement of others.
➢ The theme of appearance and reality: There appear to be two entirely separate prisoners but in reality, they are joined in conversation. The prisoner doing the communicating appears to be just slowly doing a job he has been ordered to do but actually, he is using the opportunity presented by the mirror to make contact with another prisoner in a cell.

IMAGERY

The images in the poem are the gestures made by the other prisoner, which are meaningless to the reader until the speaker translates them. As the speaker describes the small movements of the prisoner’s hand, we visualise them in our mind’s eye:
➢ The first message: ‘A warder’ is conveyed by a gesture imitating the round badge on a warder’s cap. We imagine the four fingers bunching together and travelling up to his ‘imaginary cap’.
➢ The second message: ‘He’s being watched’ is communicated by two fingers wiggling ‘like two antennae’ of an insect on the lookout for danger. This simile refers to the common gesture that indicates ‘I’m watching you’ by pointing two fingers at one’s eyes and then at the other person.
➢ The third message: ‘Later’ involves a finger making an ‘arc’ like the curved path of the tip of a watch-hand as it shows the passing of time.
➢ The final message: ‘Strength brother’ is conveyed by a simple clenched fist, the easily recognisable symbol for people’s power and unity. The speaker mentions that it is a ‘black’ fist but because the message is clearly between comrades (the speaker uses the word ‘brother’) the image also represents a bond of humanity that cuts across racial barriers.

LINE ANALYSES

LINES 1-2: By holding my mirror out of the window I see / Clear to the end of the passage.
➢ Why would the poet use a mirror this way?
The poet is in a prison cell and thus is cut off from other people. The mirror allows him to see something of the world outside of his cell. The mirror enables him to see further than he is otherwise able to.

LINES 3-4: There’s a person down there. / A prisoner polishing a doorhandle.
➢ Explain the change from ‘person’ in line 3 to ‘prisoner’ in line 4.
‘Person’ is a neutral word whereas ‘prisoner’ is very specific. The poet recognises the man as a person before labelling him as a ‘prisoner’. If one did not already know that Cronin was in prison, one would need to be told that this is a prisoner not a warder or outside worker.
In the mirror I see him see / My face in the mirror,

How has the mirror begun to fulfil its purpose?
The mirror is creating a connection between the two prisoners because it enables them to see each other. They know they are not alone. They can support each other – not physically but emotionally.

Describe a conversation of sorts.
Why are lines 12, 15 and 19 enclosed in brackets and placed some way away from the margin?
The brackets enclose how the poet interprets the prisoner's sign language. This language is obviously something that has been worked out to help them communicate without being noticed. They are hidden secret signs and the brackets help to convey this. The placing of the lines draws attention to the words as well as showing the distance between the two prisoners.

Comment on the way the ‘conversation’ recorded in these lines (12, 15 and 19) progresses.
As with the spoken language, which is indicated by italics (lines 20 & 22), in line 12, the poet tells the reader ‘This means’ and then writes the sign language in italics. In line 15, the reader is given the translation directly. In line 19, the first word which is signed by the prisoner in the passage is italicised and then the poet expands on what it means to him so that the reader understands more. The reader is thus drawn into the ‘conversation’ and to these two inmates, as they are drawn closer to each other by this exchange.

Disrupting the slow-slow rhythm of his work.

Why is the repeated and hyphenated ‘slow-slow’ (line 18) better than just ‘slow’?
The repetition slows down the reading so that one gets a better sense of the prisoner's movements. He is taking his time with his work in order to carry on this ‘conversation’.

How is the section of the poem in lines 20-23 different from the rest of the poem?
Note that there are several ways.
These lines record actual words: an exchange between the prisoner and a warder who is watching him. The speakers are in a very different relationship from that of the silent speakers. The use of Afrikaans, the different placement of the spoken words and the use of italics highlight this difference. There are no brackets, so it seems like an open conversation but actually the prisoner is concealing the truth.
Describe the TONE of lines 20 and 22.
The warder’s tone is commanding / authorative / dictatorial / autocratic while the prisoner’s tone is subservient / placatory / obedient / submissive.
The word ‘No.’ indicates that as well as the word ‘baas’.

LINE 24-25: His free hand, the talkative one, / Slips quietly behind

Comment on the apparent CONTRADICTION of ‘talkative’ (line 24) and ‘quietly’ (line 25).
The ‘talkative’ hand has been using sign language until the warder interrupts the exchange. Now, in order to make a final statement of encouragement, the prisoner must slip that hand ‘quietly’ behind his back so that the warder doesn’t notice what it is ‘saying’. This shows up the nature of the conditions under which the prisoners live. It creates a tension, wondering what the hand is going to say next. By telling the reader to watch as well (‘now watch’), it makes him complicit (involved with others in an activity that is unlawful) in this secretive action.

LINES 26-28: In my mirror, A black fist

The pattern of the ‘conversation’ changes in the final lines. Explain how and then say what effect is created by doing this.
This time the ‘words’ come first, and the sign ends the poem, creating a powerful conclusion. The inclusion of ‘brother’, even though he is white, indicates the solidarity between political prisoners. The ‘black fist’ was a sign of the anti-apartheid movement and the word ‘Amandla!’ (power) is associated with it.

DICTION
➢ The words used by the poet are simple. Mostly, they convey meaning without any positive or negative connotations.
➢ The use of Afrikaans to show the words of the warder, however, immediately has connotations in the context of the anti-apartheid struggle. We do not need to be told that this is the warder speaking, as the use of Afrikaans makes this clear. The warder’s words are also abrasive and authoritative (‘Hey! Wat maak jy daar?’ – What are you doing?).
➢ Similarly, the prisoner’s use of the word ‘baas’ (boss) in his reply to the warder is a clear indication of his understanding of power relationships in the prison. We understand that the prisoner does not really consider the warder to be his boss but is using the term almost ironically, to keep the warder’s attention away from the conversation he is having with the speaker.

TONE
➢ Because the messages between the prisoners have to be conveyed in silence, the tone is secretive and intimate. It is as if the speaker is inviting the reader to join him and the other prisoner in their communication, which excludes the warder.
➢ The fact that the gestures are instantly understood by the speaker increases this sense of intimacy.
We do not know the prisoner’s name, and it seems that the speaker also doesn’t know him personally. The speaker describes him as ‘a person’ (line 3) and ‘a prisoner’ (line 4). Their comradeship and intimacy are based on their shared beliefs and values, and their shared opposition to apartheid.

In line 23, the speaker says ‘now watch’ as if he is urging the reader to watch with him as the prisoner communicates his messages of solidarity and defiance. This also heightens the tone of intimacy and secrecy.

In line 20, the warder says, ‘Hey! Wat maak jy daar?’ His tone is commanding / authoritative / dictatorial / autocratic

In line 22, the prisoner’s tone is is subservient / placatory / obedient / submissive indicate by his words, ‘No’ and ‘baas’.

IMPORTANT POINTS

SECTION B: ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS SET ON THE POEM:

3.1 Refer to lines 3 – 4: ‘There’s a person … a door handle.’

Account for the speaker’s use of the words ‘a person’ followed by the words ‘a prisoner.’

3.2 Refer to line 24: ‘His free hand, the talkative one’.

Explain the significance of the image in this line.

3.3 Refer to the title: ‘Motho ke Motho ka Batho Babang (A Person is a Person Because of Other People).

Comment on the appropriateness of the title in the context of the poem.

3.4 Refer to lines 19 – 28: ‘(Later. Maybe later … / A black fist.’

Critically comment on the contrast between true and false communication in the context of the poem.

SECTION C: MORE QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ON THE POEM

1. Explain in your own words why the speaker holds his mirror ‘out of the window’.

He is alone in his prison cell and wants to find out what is going on outside (1) but as a political prisoner is not allowed to communicate openly with other prisoners (1) so he holds the mirror outside the window, in the corridor, so that he can see what is happening further down the corridor (1).

2. Explain the effect of the use of the word ‘travels’ in line 10.

This implies that the bunched fingers representing the ‘badge’ move slowly and carefully up into position on the imaginary ‘cap’ (1). We find ourselves imagining the image as if we are seeing it through the speaker’s eyes – it creates a vivid image of what is being communicated (1).
3. Refer to lines 16–18: ‘A finger ... his work’.
   What does this tell us about the manner in which the prisoners communicate with each other? (2)

   The prisoner knows that the warders must not notice any change in the rhythm or speed of his work (1) but he is so skilled at this method of communicating that he can make the gesture for ‘Later’ without any disruption (1).

4. Describe the tone of the communication between the warder and the prisoner. (3)

   The warder speaks in an abrupt, disrespectful manner (1) that shows his power over the prisoners (1). To avoid any conflict the prisoner replies in a respectful manner, using the word ‘baas’ (1).

5. Explain the relevance of the layout of the poem. (3)

   The lines on the left side of the page form the narrative in which the speaker explains what he sees (1). On the far right of the page the speaker translates the messages for the reader (1). The warder’s sudden question to the prisoner is placed in the middle of the page, suggesting that it is an unwelcome intrusion in the ‘conversation’ between the two comrades (1).

6. Discuss the effectiveness of the last three words of the poem. (2)

   The final message given by the prisoner is one of solidarity and support, reinforcing the idea expressed in the title of the poem (1). It ends the poem with an inspirational image as a ‘black fist’ also represents black power – the determination of the South African people to achieve freedom from oppression (1).

| SECTION C: EXAMPLE OF AN ESSAY QUESTION |

**Essay question**

Cronin’s poem ‘Motho Ke Motho Ka Batho Babang’ demonstrates his belief that we need the support of others, and close communication with others, in order to maintain our humanity. By close reference to the diction, imagery and tone used in this poem, critically discuss this statement.

Your response should take the form of a well-constructed essay of 250–300 words (about ONE page).
The poem begins with an image of complete isolation – a prisoner alone in a cell, not allowed to communicate with other prisoners. To try and make some contact with others, he uses his mirror to see what is going on outside. The prisoner he sees in the corridor begins a silent communication with him by means of gestures.

The speaker gives us a clear picture of the images he observes: the fingers that ‘Bunch together’ to show ‘An object ... badge’ on the ‘imaginary cap’ of a warder; the two fingers making a ‘vee’ and wiggling ‘like two antennae’ to show he is being watched; the moving ‘watch-hand’s arc’, to show they will speak later; and finally the clenched fist to indicate solidarity and support. All these images are understood perfectly by the speaker and in spite of his solitude he feels supported and comforted; part of a caring community.

The diction used by the poet is simple and informal. The conversation between the two prisoners is confined to silent gestures expressing simple yet powerful ideas (‘A warder.’; ‘Later.’; ‘Strength brother’). Similarly, the speaker’s narrative uses simple words to describe what he saw (‘There’s a person down there’; ‘He’s being watched’; ‘In my mirror, A black fist’) but this was clearly a moving and important experience for him. This suggests that closeness and communication between people does not have to be complicated – we merely have to be understood and supported.

The tone of the poem is also informal and conversational, almost intimate. The speaker tells us every detail of what he sees so that we are drawn into the silent yet satisfying conversation, as if we are participants. He mentions the imaginary badge ‘Which travels ... forehead’ and we find ourselves watching in our imaginations.
The poet thus uses an informal, intimate tone and simple diction to convey a series of powerful images that show us clearly how the prisoners maintained a community that allowed them to feel that they had not been deprived of their humanity.