



# Fugard transforms art into lived reality: teaching *Tsotsi* to Grade 11s

**SUE MCINTOSH**

Teaching the single novel of such a well-known playwright was an interesting challenge, but as we began reading the text, I realized how my Grade 11s would benefit from the wonderful descriptive passages, engaging characters and enduring themes.

A few important aspects of Fugard's writing:

- He was always determined to produce works of art that would **outlive short-term political interest**. In choosing to narrate the transformation of a criminal, he details a story of personal redemption which relates to all cultures and times. The narrative of internal discovery; of a man moving from relational dysfunctionality to meaningful communication, is a story of universal hope.
- He was aware of the **deeply scarring human political landscape of South Africa during Apartheid**. The setting of *Tsotsi* reveals:
  - the pain of brutal arrests for pass law (Tsotsi's mother is taken away from her child at night, and he is never re-united with him) ;
  - the poverty of township life (Miriam waits hours for water at the only pump in the area);
  - forced removals (which precipitate the bulldozer incident that kills Tsotsi and the baby).
- Like much of South African writing of the 70's and 80's this novel negotiates **the tricky border between socio-political statement and what one might call disinterested art**. (Levy 2004: 8). What Euro-centric artists have little conception of is the difficulty of remaining disinterested about the experience of growing up in Apartheid. It hurt everyone involved, so it must be expressed. The novel *Tsotsi* does this effectively, drawing the reader into its cycle of pain and finally its hope for redemption.
- Fugard's writing is remarkable for the way it transforms into art **the pain of lived reality**. This can be experienced in passages in the novel which detail the torment of Tsotsi as he recalls his childhood and begins to rediscover the real David, who had blocked out his distressing memories of abandonment . Furthermore, the courage and suffering of Boston and Morris Tsabalala highlight the pain of unrealized dreams and disability in a world where people are generally selfish. The pain of these two men is exacerbated by Tsotsi and later healed during his transformation: Morris realizes he wants desperately to live, while being followed by Tsotsi, and then his fear is allayed when Tsotsi decides to spare him.

Without the baby, Tsotsi would never have had his softer emotions re-awakened, so that he could feel what Morris was going through.

When Tsotsi beats Boston up, he is left for dead. The criminal's return to care for Boston's wounds and talk to him is a change brought about by his encounter with God's mercy towards him.

Now for some practical tips for how to present the novel in class:

- Accompanying this article is a **power point presentation** with an introduction, vocabulary and a summary for each chapter, as well as reference to questions at the back of the novel and two essay topics.
- Unfortunately, the answers to the questions are provided at the back. Try to keep that a secret as long as possible from your class, or else they will not bother to answer the questions themselves. You could cut out the answers from the back of the book.
- The Gavin Hood film production of *Tsotsi* (2005) adds a post-Apartheid setting to the novel, including the middle-class parents of the kidnapped baby ( Mr and Mrs Dube), with Tsotsi returning the baby to them.
- Once you have read the novel, this change seems unsatisfactory, imposed upon the original text to make it more sensational. I suggest that you only show the movie after you have finished the text, allowing the learners to come to this conclusion themselves.
- Try to read most of the text aloud in class, leaving out only the long descriptive passages.
- Foreground the socio-political landscape in your teaching.
- Encourage the learners to write character descriptions of each person.
- I have also attached a test and exam question for the novel.

## **Bibliography**

**2005** David Levey: *African Encounters* Study Guide for ENN 204-K

1980 Athol Fugard: *Tsotsi*