CHAPTER ONE
A CONCISE HISTORY OF SOUTH AFRICAN PRISONS

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Before one can begin an examination of prison literature, it is vital to have some understanding of the history of the prisons in which this writing was taking place – or in some cases, about which this writing was being generated. Andrew Sobanet remarks that the “prison is a distinct cultural modality that results in a distinct literary modality – the prison novel” (2002: 2). Because life in prison is so different from what we, as the readers of prison literature, would have experienced on the outside, the literature generated from a prison experience must be read from a different perspective too. In order to begin to understand the nature of the writing that prison-authors have produced from within this distinct “cultural modality”, a background to the South African prison system and laws under which the prison-authors were arrested and incarcerated is vital. This kind of background is essential for the reading of prison literature: it is “necessary to understand those ideas which have been nurtured by prison and to understand prison as a school for writers” (Davies 1990: 3). Of course, it must be recognized at the same time that prison-authors typically make up only a small proportion of the overall prison population. Davies says that we need to understand “the imprisoned intellectual as writing not only in a margin of the society that imprisons, but also in a margin of the prison itself” (1990: 4).

This chapter should not be seen as a comprehensive overview of the history of incarceration in South Africa – a subject too vast to be covered adequately here. The chapter is, rather, a brief outline of the history of prisons in South Africa that will provide some background to the writings
that are at the centre of this study – prison literature. The difficulty of providing such an outline for a country like South Africa stems from the fact that much of the early history of this country was passed down through oral tradition, most of which has been lost through time. The most obvious starting point would be the arrival of the Dutch in the Cape in 1652. However, starting the study at this point does not imply that there was no form of detainment before this.

1.2 PRISONS WITHIN SOUTH AFRICA

When the Dutch first occupied the Cape in 1652, a bodily type of punishment was used on offenders – public executions and crucifixions. At this point in history, imprisonment did not seem to be a priority. There were fortifications in which detainees were held before they were deported. For the Dutch, it was important to remove the criminal from society and so mass deportation occurred to Robben Island and Dutch colonies in the East.

It was only during the first British Occupation (1795–1803) that physical punishment began to decline and was replaced with incarceration. Shortly after the abolition of slavery in 1807, a penal policy was introduced at the Cape. As a result of slavery being abolished, the Cape suffered from a huge shortage of labour. In order to combat this, a rudimentary pass system was introduced, and abuse against this system resulted in imprisonment. These prisoners were made to work on public projects such as the building of roads. The prison system at this time in history was used principally to provide labour. Tribes resisting colonial expansion waged war against the Cape government, and were also imprisoned. One of the most famous examples of this concerned the Khoisan group known as the /Xam, who were imprisoned due to their involvement in the Koranna wars in the middle of the nineteenth century. This type of imprisonment continued throughout the nineteenth century right up until the discovery of gold and diamonds in South Africa.
With these discoveries came mining and mine compounds. Historians often compare the conditions of early twentieth-century South African prisons with the conditions found in the mine compounds. “One of the distinguishing features of the development of the South African prison was its similarity to another key institution in South Africa’s history, the mine compound” (http://www.iss.co.za/Pubs/Monographs/No29/History.html). Compounds were used to house thousands of mineworkers and to ensure tight control over the workers, just as in the case of prisoners in actual prisons. In 1885, De Beers was the first private company to employ convicts for labour and went a step further by building a prison, which was controlled by the company. Dirk Van Zyl Smit points out that “the role of the state as the provider of unskilled black labour for the mines through the penal system had become manifest” (1992: 15).

The year 1859 saw the establishment of the Breakwater Prison that housed convicts who worked on the construction of the breakwater in Table Bay. This was the first prison to introduce racial segregation. Authorities believed that blacks were less able to respond to rehabilitative programmes and would need punitive treatment longer than whites. Therefore, they argued that it was in the best interests of whites to be kept away from blacks. The original building had large dormitories that housed sixty men – one can already see the similarity between the prison and the compound. After a work strike in 1885, prison authorities were convinced that interracial contact caused the worst form of trouble among prisoners. In 1902 the Industrial Breakwater Prison was built to house white male convicts. Racial segregation became entrenched: “some of the black convicts of the ‘good conduct category’ learned trades in the workshops, but most were used as unskilled labour in the docks. This pattern continued in the South African prison services up until the late 20th century” (http://cybercapetown.com).

After the turn of the century, imprisoned African men were still available for work, as failure to pay taxes and to produce passes was still punishable by imprisonment. The Prisons and Reformatories Act 13 of 1911
was introduced shortly after Union in 1910. As a result of this Act, the courts started to play a large role in the development of prison law and the treatment of prisoners within the system. Prisoners were now afforded the opportunity to ask the courts to intervene when treatment within the prisons was deemed unfair; they could also have their sentences shortened for good behaviour. Punishment within the prisons, however, was still severe. It included whippings, solitary confinement, dietary punishment and additional labour.

Developments in 1945 attempted to remedy the situation. The Lansdowne Commission felt that Act 13 of 1911 was merely a means by which to continue the harsh conditions of the system that had preceded it. The Commission believed that the focus in the prisons should be on rehabilitation and not on militarization. Sadly, nothing came of these recommendations and the situation actually worsened when farmers were given permission to construct prison outstations on their farms to house prison labourers.

In 1959, new prison legislation based on the policy of apartheid was introduced. Segregation was extended to include the ethnic separation of black prisoners. Giffard points out that this division into different ethnic groups was another feature shared with the mine compounds and was used to exercise control over the workers (1997: 16). Although the new legislation acknowledged the United Nations’ Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, it ignored crucial aspects such as the prohibition of corporal punishment, which was used to the extreme.

All prisons became closed institutions in that all media coverage and outside inspections were prohibited. It is for this reason that the writing that took place in the prisons at this time is of such great importance. Up to the early 1900s, there is little record of any literature being produced in prisons. As Davies argues, “clearly we know the past only through the artifacts which have survived, and the most significant artifacts are our creative ones, notably language and the written word” (1990: 5). It is this writing
that provides insight into the prisons, and without it we simply do not know what conditions were like in these years. Details about prison conditions during the apartheid years are very hard to come by. “Article 44 (1)(f) of the Prisons Act (No. 8 of 1959) for many years operated as an effective legal obstacle to the publication of any information about prison conditions or the experience of imprisonment” (Gready 1993: 491). This Act also severely restricted the making and publishing of sketches, or the taking of photographs of prisons or prisoners.

Prisons continued to be managed under a system of segregation and, after 1959, the militaristic approach intensified. In the early 1960s, the prisons were used to curb political unrest and “the incarceration of political detainees and sentenced political prisoners became a feature of South African prisons” (http://www.iss.co.za/Pubs/Monographs/No29/ History.html). This is a vital point in the context of this particular study because it is often argued that prison writing in South Africa is synonymous with political writing – an argument that will be explored later on.

The conditions in these apartheid prisons were abominable, due to gross overcrowding, poor living conditions and continual cases of assault and violation of other human rights. Dirk Van Zyl Smit’s book *South African Prison Law and Practice* (1992) provides valuable detail on the history of imprisonment in South Africa. Former president Nelson Mandela made the following comment about his incarceration: “Prison not only robs you of your freedom, it attempts to take away your identity . . . It is by definition a purely authoritarian state that tolerates no independence and individuality. As a freedom fighter and a man, one must fight against the prison’s attempts to rob one of these qualities” (Stern 1998: 107). Between 1975 and 1984, South Africa had one of the world’s highest rates of imprisonment: 1.9 million alone were arrested for failing to carry their pass documents.

Jacobs states, “the Spring 1986 Amnesty International Campaign Report deals with the escalation of human rights abuses in South Africa
since the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950. The cryptic title, ‘A South African Story: Banning, Detention, Imprisonment’, given in this report to an account of yet another victim of the extensive and intimidating body of laws that enables the government to rule by force, recognizes what has become established as a tragic pattern in the life of this country” (1986: 95). As recently as 1986, prisoners were subjected to inhumane forms of torture and violence. This is clearly seen in the writings of the prison-authors, who might have been fortunate enough to avoid this brutality, but certainly were aware of its continual use in the prisons.

It was only after the release of Nelson Mandela that action was taken to reform and restructure the Department of Prisons. During 1988, some changes did occur, in that racial segregation was no longer enforced in prisons and the prison regulation that white staff automatically outranked black staff was repealed. In the 1990s, transformation occurred in various parts of the department: demilitarization, prisoners’ health, independent inspection and human resource management were among the areas of change. In a landmark case of Minister of Justice v Hofmeyer in 1993, the court accepted “the principle that a prisoner retains all his personal rights except those abridged by law, and that the extent and content of such rights should be determined by reference not only to the legislation, but also to the common-law rights of prisoners” (1993 3 SA 131 (A)). This statement clearly illustrates the almost miraculous changes that have taken place in South African prisons since the time most of the authors examined in this study were incarcerated. However, as a result of the continual problem of overcrowding, there are still huge obstacles to be overcome in our prison system.

Prison life remains dominated by gangs who wield considerable control over daily life in prisons: “They dominate every aspect of prison life. They control the allocation of prisoners to cells, the distribution of food, the vibrant drug trade, and much of the sexual activity” (http://www.csrv.org.za/papers/papad&se.htm). It is important to mention this here because, according
to Amanda Dissel, in Reform and Stasis: Transformation in South African Prisons (first printed in Cirque Internationale), “in these and other respects [as mentioned above], the features of South African prisons bear a close relationship to conditions in society at large” (http://www.csvr.org.za/papers/papad&se.htm).

If one is to argue that the literature of a period in time reflects the social conditions in which the author finds him or herself – and Dissel believes that contemporary South African prisons are a mirror image of society – can we categorize prison literature and other forms of literature as belonging to separate genres? Can they belong to different genres and yet reflect similar social conditions, or should we classify all present-day literature simply as ‘Post-Apartheid’? This means that the writing that was being published by authors on the ‘outside’ would reflect a South African society similar to that found in a prison society at the same time. Thus there would be so many similarities between prison literature and other literature that there is no point in distinguishing between the two. This is not the case. The point of raising this argument is that there are marked differences when everything, according to the critics cited above, points to the similarities which should be manifest. This issue will be examined in Chapter Three, where it will be shown that there are clear differences between prison literature and other writings.

1.3 OTHER PRISONS USED BY SOUTH AFRICA

As previously mentioned, as early as 1642 prisoners were being deported to Robben Island and Dutch colonies further afield. It is important to look at these prisons, too, because of the writings that were produced there – the most famous example being Nelson Mandela’s Long Walk to Freedom (1996) that includes a chapter about his time served on Robben Island.

Robben Island was discovered by the colonists in 1488 and from then on the Portuguese, Dutch and British sailors used the island both as an
outpost and a prison. The Khoikhoi became the first South African prisoners on Robben Island. The Khoikhoi became ensnared in a battle with the explorers from Europe for hundreds of years and those who fought back were caught and imprisoned. The first political prisoner was Autshumato in 1658, who was exiled to Robben Island simply because he was taking back cattle his people believed to have been unfairly confiscated by European settlers (http://www.freedom.co.za/history1.html).

The 1800s saw conflict between the British and the Xhosa. Those taken captive during the Hundred Years War were sent to Robben Island. The legendary Xhosa prophet Makana was one of many captured during the Frontier Wars and taken to Robben Island. The conditions in the prisons were deplorable, with the prisoners being chained and beaten and being subjected to physical violence such as rape.

Change came to Robben Island during the 1900s with the sick being removed and facilities being upgraded. It was still regarded as an ideal place to incarcerate prisoners, however, and in 1961 more prisoners were sent there. Most of the leaders of the African National Congress who drafted the Freedom Charter in a campaign of defiance against the apartheid government were sent there. “Political prisoners held on Robben Island between about 1963 and 1968 experienced the most barbaric prison conditions perpetrated under apartheid . . . Extreme violence was the essential characteristic of Robben Island during this period” (Gready 1993: 516).

The conditions for the prisoners on Robben Island remained abysmal. The island has been compared to a Nazi concentration camp – cold, damp, barren and lonely, with prisoners sleeping on mattresses in poorly built huts. A former prisoner on Robben Island, Ahmed Kathrada, writes, “While we will not forget the brutality of apartheid, we will not want Robben Island to be a monument to our hardship and suffering. We would want Robben Island to be a monument . . . reflecting the triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil” (http://www.freedom.co.za). This kind of writing, full
of emotion and personal detail, is prevalent in the collection of prison literature. As a result of the powerfully emotive experience of being imprisoned, authors like Kathrada write in a manner unlike authors who have not been imprisoned.

Many South Africans found themselves prisoners on other islands. The British imprisoned approximately 27 000 Boers during the South African War, who were distributed far and wide throughout the world. Some were detained on St. Helena, in India at Umbala and Amritsar and on Ceylon. Others were sent to Portugal and the Bermudas. The prison quarters consisted of tin shanties and tents or bamboo and reeds. The exiles on Ceylon and St. Helena were active in printing while others started to practice a trade. Literary works were produced in the atmosphere of religion and culture created by the Boers at their camps. The writings about these prisons and by these prisoners will not be examined in this study because these authors were prisoners-of-war rather than the prison ‘inmates’ – whose writings are the principal focus here. (A comprehensive list of these prisons, the prisoners and their writings can be found at [http://www.icon.co.za/~dup42/buk3.htm](http://www.icon.co.za/~dup42/buk3.htm).

Almost all of the authors who are examined in this study were imprisoned for political reasons. New laws were being put in place all the time, and these made it easier for the authorities to imprison dissenters. This was especially true during the apartheid years. The authors featured in this study often make mention of the various Acts under which they were imprisoned, and an explanation of these Acts is therefore vital.

Breyten Breytenbach, Jeremy Cronin, Caesarina Makhoere and Emma Mashinini were held under the 1967 Terrorism Act. According to Paul Gready, “the definition of terms such as communism and terrorism were rewritten to the extent that they became a nonsense. A communist became anyone who challenged the status quo” (1993: 492). This Act became an important piece of security legislation. There were no well-defined limitations to the Act, so it could legally be used to arrest anyone who was
seen as a possible threat to the government. A statement by Amnesty
International made to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in
London on 3 August 1977 referred to this as the most “draconian” of all the
types of detention permitted under South African law. Under the provisions
of this Act, the offence of ‘terrorism’ is defined in very broad terms as any
activity likely to “endanger the maintenance of law and order in South
Africa and Namibia” (Amnesty International 1977: 2). It was regarded as a
“terrorist” offence for any person to “further encourage the achievement of
any political aim or social or economic change.”

Section 6 of this Act allowed for up to ninety days’ detention without
trial. Many of the authors found themselves detained in this manner. Often,
the prisoner would be released after the initial ninety days only to be re-
arrested immediately. This was true for Ruth First, who spent a total of 117
days in detention. This cycle of arrest and release could occur a number of
times before a charge would be laid and a trial date set. The ninety days of
imprisonment were later formalized as being a part of the General Law
Amendment Act of 1963. It gave the police the authority to interrogate and
extract information. The prisoners were held incommunicado during this
time. The government later introduced the 180-Day Act. Prison-authors like
Kathrada, Sachs, Lewin and Brutus were initially held under the Ninety
Day Act and were then sentenced under the Sabotage Act and were found
guilty of treason.

It is with this background in mind – especially the fact that these
prisons held men and women who were writing – that we move on to an
examination of prison literature in order to show that, through their prison
experience, these authors ‘created’ a body of writing – South African prison
literature.
CHAPTER TWO
A SURVEY OF SOUTH AFRICAN PRISON LITERATURE

Although much has been written on and about so-called prison literature both in South Africa and around the world, there is no comprehensive survey of all the primary and secondary sources available. The aim of this chapter is to give a brief overview of South African prison literature. This chapter also provides an extensive list of secondary sources and university studies that are of value to the student of prison literature.

One of the aims of this study is to demonstrate the ways in which Herman Charles Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug* is the foundational text of South African prison literature; this is thus the first text to be noted in this survey. Chronologically, it also comes first in terms of the major works that are to be mentioned here. Bosman was imprisoned for murder in 1926 and only many years after his release did he begin writing *Cold Stone Jug*, which was first published in 1949. The most recent edition of this work was published in 1999, in an Anniversary Edition edited by Stephen Gray. Bosman’s novel will be examined in some detail later on in this study.

At this point it is important to provide as comprehensive a listing of the primary texts available in the collection of South African prison literature as possible. However, the corpus of works outlined below should not be considered entirely complete as new literature is coming to light all the time. After Bosman, authors who have made their mark in terms of prison literature include Ruth First who published her prison account, *117 Days: An Account of Confinement and Interrogation under the South African Ninety-Day Detention Law* (1965). First is a pioneer woman prison-author. Albie Sachs wrote about his capture and long periods in solitary
confinement in *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (1966). Many of the prison memoirs/novels were banned under the apartheid government and perhaps this is why so few critics have taken notice of these writings. The ban meant that these novels were not available to the South African student and thus studies on this literature were severely hampered until recently. Some of the other major prison novels include Hugh Lewin’s *Bandiet* (1974), which has also been re-published under the title *Bandiet: Out of Jail* (2002). *And Night Fell: Memoirs of a Political Prisoner in South Africa* (1983) by Molefe Pheto can be compared to the writing of Albie Sachs because Pheto, like Sachs, is one of the few political prison-authors to have spent most of his time in prison in solitary confinement.

Another noteworthy prison novel is *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* by Breyten Breytenbach, which was first published in 1984. Breytenbach wrote about his capture by the security police on his return to South Africa in 1974 and his imprisonment that followed. The first edition of this work is remarkable in that one can see how censorship plays a large role in prison literature, with large portions of Breytenbach’s writing being deleted from this edition, “for considerations not relating to the various Publication Acts” (1984: front page). *Diary from a South African Prison* (1987) by Tshenuwani Simon Farisani and Caesarina Kona Makhoere’s *No Child’s Play: In Prison under Apartheid* (1988) are further examples of prison literature that were initially banned in this country. Raymond Suttner’s *Inside Apartheid’s Prison: Notes and Letters of Struggle* (2001), a contender for the 2002 Alan Paton Non-fiction Award, recalls the ten years he spent in prison. The book is interspersed with letters he wrote in prison to his friends and family. Suttner attempts to make what was clearly an extremely traumatic time in his life – he lost an eye in prison as a result of horrific torture – seem almost humorous: “It is a story of stomach-churning fear, relentless self-control and profound courage, told without trumpets and fanfare” (http://www.suntimes.co.za). Written along similar lines is Quentin Jacobsen’s *Solitary in Johannesburg* (1974).
There are a number of women prison-authors who wrote prison novels. Apart from Makhoere and First, Emma Mashinini wrote a powerful and moving account of her time spent in jail in * Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989). This particular autobiographical novel is not entirely typical of prison literature because it includes details of Mashinini’s life as a whole as well as the time she spent in prison. It is not typical of prison literature to have this broader view, but it can be found in a number of works mentioned later in this survey, yet not included in this study as such. Jean Middleton wrote *Convictions: A Woman Political Prisoner Remembers* (1998). This particular book recalls Middleton’s time spent in detention and a string of prisons for a period of four years. She says that her experience was the same as “all white middle-class woman prisoners jailed for their political convictions” (http://www.safrica.info). Another recently published prison account by a woman prison-author is *Prison Diary: One Hundred and Thirteen Days, 1976* (2001) by Fatima Meer. Meer kept a diary during her time in the Old Fort in Johannesburg in which she recorded very personal details of her day-to-day routine.

Because Robben Island has become a vital landmark in terms of South African history, I believe it important to separate the prison literature written on and about incarceration on the island and discuss this corpus of work on its own. This writing has a unique set of characteristics simply because these prisoners were away from the traditional South African prison system and thus their experiences were different too. Dennis Brutus is one of the first prison-authors to have spent time in prison on Robben Island and then to have published writings about his experience upon his release. His collection of prison poetry, entitled *Letters to Martha*, was published in 1968. The largest body of works that fall into the category prison literature has come from prisoners on this island. The next work to be published about a personal prison experience on Robben Island is D. M. Zwelonke’s *Robben Island* (1973). This work differs from the others mentioned because most of it is fictionalized: Zwelonke is not writing about
his personal prison-experience but rather how he imagines a prison experience to be. The same is true of Lewis Nkosi’s *Mating Birds* (1986). Fictionalized works of this sort have not been included in this study because, in the interests of clarity of focus, one of the criteria for inclusion (see Chapter Three) has been that the work in question must be about the personal prison experience of the author him or herself. Such prison-authors, who are the principal focus of this study, attempt to keep their writing as true to life as possible. Michael Dingake wrote about the hardships he experienced in *My Fight against Apartheid* (1987). Other accounts include an autobiographical memoir by Moses Dlamini, *Hell-Hole Robben Island: Reminiscences of a Political Prisoner in South Africa* (1984), Indres Naidoo’s vivid account as told to Albie Sachs, *Island in Chains: Ten Years on Robben Island by Prisoner 885/63* (1982) and Strini Moodley’s *Prison Walls* (1985). Jurgen Schadeberg wrote *Voices from Robben Island* (1994), which is a documentary about Robben Island based on the testimonies of prisoners like Tokyo Sexwale. Mac Maharaj has put together a collection of biographical sketches of his fellow prisoners on Robben Island in *Reflections in Prison* (2001). This book includes essays written by Mandela, Sisulu and Kathrada.

What also needs to be taken note of are the accounts of prison-authors of their own prison experience that are written as a small part of a larger work. This may take the form of a chapter in an autobiography. Again, in the interests of clarity of focus, such prison writing is not going to be examined in any detail in this study because it does not fall into the broad criteria set by the study. The criterion at issue in this case is that the literature to be examined must be a piece of writing that focuses solely on the prison experience of the author. It is vital to stipulate this for the sake of brevity as well as to keep this subsection of literature as true to its name as possible – ‘prison literature’. There is an abundance of writing available which makes reference to a prison experience as part of a life story, and including all of this would overwhelm the present study. I have included a list of such literature in the interests of comprehensiveness – in other words, to indicate what is available to a student of prison literature. Writings that incorporate a section on imprisonment include Nelson Mandela’s *No Easy Walk to Freedom* (1965), Piet Coetzer’s biography entitled *Alan Hendrikse: Awaiting Trial* (1965) and Naboth Makgatle’s *The Autobiography of an Unknown South African* (1971). More recent works include Winnie Mandela’s *Part of My Soul* (1984), Cedric Mayson’s *A Certain Sound* (1984), Ellen Kuzwayo’s *Call Me Woman* (1985), Helen Joseph’s *Side by Side* (1986), Norma Kitson’s *Where Sixpence Lives* (1986), Frank Chikane’s *No Life of My Own* (1988), Maggie Resha’s *Mangoana o tsoara thipa ka bohaleng: My Life in the Struggle* (1991) and Nelson Mandela’s *Nelson Mandela: The Struggle is My Life* (1994) – the last is a collection of Mandela’s speeches and writings and an account of Mandela in prison by his fellow prisoners.

There are also a number of collections that have been put together which make for valuable reading for the student of South African prison literature. These collections include *Lives of Courage: Women for a New South Africa* (1989). This collection of work, edited by Diana Russell, includes the writings and testimonies of imprisonment by Feziwe
Geoffrey Bould has also put together a collection of prison writings called *Conscience Be My Guide: An Anthology of Prison Writings* (1991). In Barbara Schreiner’s collection *A Snake with Ice Water: Prison Writings by South African Women* (1992), the writings of Phyllis Naidoo and Helene Pastoor can be found. Another collection of women’s writing which includes prison poetry is *In Ink@boiling Point: A Selection of 21st Century Black Women’s Writing From the Southern Tip of Africa* (2002). This collection, edited by Shelley Barry et al., includes an article entitled “A Plea to Poetry: Pollsmoor Prison” written by Gertrude Fester. *Gathering Seaweed* (2002) is another useful collection of prison writings that was edited by Jack Mapanje. This collection, however, includes a range of African prison writing and therefore some of the writings are excluded from this study. Apart from all the writings mentioned above, prison support groups in South Africa have printed brochures that include the written statements and affidavits of many South African prisoners.

A brief survey of all the secondary sources available to the student of South African prison literature will reveal that few comprehensive studies have been made of this literature. Critics have offered interpretations of specific aspects of the literature and theses and dissertations available do much the same. No attempt has been made to take account of all of the major works in this field – across genres and periods – and this is the principal motivating factor for the present study. A study such as this can add great value to South African prison literature. However, given the vast scope of the subject, as is clearly shown in the above discussion, this study only scratches the surface of what could be a vital part not only of the history of South Africa but of its literature too.

One of the most well-documented commentaries on prison literature can be found in the introduction to the Anniversary Edition of *Cold Stone Jug*, where the editor, Stephen Gray, mentions how “contemporary scholars attempt to describe the now substantial subsection of South African writing
designated as ‘prison literature’” (1999: 34). Although his discussion is fairly detailed, Gray’s focus on the secondary sources available tends to be on those that include this particular novel in their purview. Other discussions of prison literature as a group of writings examine the primary sources available and not the studies made of it. For these reasons, I would like to offer a survey of secondary sources available to the student of prison literature in South Africa and show how much has been done. This survey also highlights how much still needs to be done, and I hope that this particular study will serve as a catalyst for the focus on and the study of prison literature as a whole.

In the introduction to the 1999 edition of Cold Stone Jug, Stephen Gray writes that the article entitled “South African Prison Literature” by Sheila Roberts in Ariel of April 1985 is the first major critical text to be published about South African prison literature in which prison literature is isolated as a distinct category of South African writing (Gray1999: 35). J. U. Jacobs, in an entry on South African prison literature in The Routledge Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English (1994: 1312–1314), gives a fairly comprehensive overview of prison literature in South Africa, which he deems “a recognisable sub-genre of autobiography” (1994: 1314). This point is reflected on in Chapter Three where, it is argued, one of the common features of prison literature is its autobiographical nature. The journal articles and books to be mentioned here are particularly those that make reference to prison literature as a separate subsection of the larger corpus of literature in general. Many critics have written articles on the primary sources listed in Chapter Two, but have not necessarily looked at the works as examples of prison literature.

Although Sheila Roberts is the first to explore the idea of prison literature, there are critics who started looking at the works of prison-authors before Roberts, and questioning whether or not these prisoners can in fact be considered ‘authors.’ This process began in 1973 with the publication of an article in African Literature Today by Bahadur Tejani
entitled “Can the Prisoner Make a Poet? A Critical Discussion of ‘Letters to Martha’ by Dennis Brutus.” Tejani explores the idea of a prisoner writing and publishing literature without categorizing this literature into prison literature. He spends a great deal of time questioning the sincerity of Brutus’s poetry while trying to determine whether or not the poems can actually be considered prison poetry. Although Tenjani makes some valid points in this article, I find it too subjective to be of any real value to a study such as this. Shortly after the publication of this article, C. J. Driver made a valuable contribution in his article, “The View from Makana Island: Some Recent Prison Books from South Africa” published in the *Journal of South African Studies* in 1975. This article begins with a survey of the primary texts – although this is not the primary aim or intention of the author. Driver examines the texts of Brutus, Sachs, Lewin and Zwelonke in terms of politics and what their texts reveal about ‘black imagination’ and a common prison experience with particular reference to Robben Island. Gray says that this particular review-article is “the first to link *Cold Stone Jug* to the new school of prison writers” (1999: 35). In 1979, Neil Rusch in his article “Cold Stone Jug: A History of the South African Prison Crusade”, published in the Autumn edition of *Speak*, examines how Bosman writes about prison conditions, breaking the silence about what was happening on the ‘inside.’ Gray (1999: 35) says that Rusch “tries devotedly to use *Cold Stone Jug* as his key text in recounting what he terms the subsequent Prison Reform Crusade to lift restrictions on reporting of prison conditions within the new gulag of the apartheid state.”

The year 1982 saw the publication of “On the Business of Literary Criticism: With Special Reference to Bahadur Tejani’s Article ‘Can the Prisoner Make a Poet?’” in *African Literature Today* by M. J. Salt. Salt attacks Tejani for the very reasons that I have cited: Tejani is simply too tendentious, and his argument is poorly grounded and reasoned. Salt shows how preconceived ideas and assumptions made by Tenjani on the issues of prison poetry and Brutus himself undermine the article’s value as literary
criticism. “The basic point, then, is that the critic’s own point of view has prevented him from obtaining any clear understanding of the poetry of Dennis Brutus” (Salt 1975: 140).

At this stage it is apparent that critics are becoming more aware of literature that is being written on and about prison. Up to this point, none of the secondary sources available actually categorizes prison literature as such. One can see that it is gradually being examined as a separate body of literature, although critics do not display a conscious awareness of this body of writings as constituting a new subsection of South African literature. They are, however, starting to separate prison literature from other works by the same authors. Stephen Gray published an interview that he held with Jeremy Cronin about his prison poetry in 1984. Although the focus of this interview was the severe censorship laws that were in place at the time, the interview dealt only with the poems he wrote in prison. This interview highlights many constructive points in terms of the actual act of writing. Cronin tells Gray about the many difficulties that he faced writing in prison. These include censorship, and his attempts at memorizing and disguising his poems in the form of letters. Cronin also mentions how important writing was in keeping him sane (many of the prison-authors mention this fact in their prison writings).

As mentioned earlier, it is only in 1985 that ‘prison literature’ is expressly used as a term to denote a body of work. In her article, “South African Prison Literature”, Roberts recognizes prison literature as a separate category of writing. She cites Cold Stone Jug as the foundational text in this category of literature and then goes on to examine the writings of Brutus, Breytenbach and Cronin. This article not only substantiates the argument (which will be advanced in detail later) that Bosman should be regarded as the father of prison literature, but also holds the view that there are many similarities in the prison writings of the prison-authors.

After Roberts’s article there seems to have been an awakening as regards the recognition of prison literature as a distinct category of writing.
Critics begin to examine this corpus of work, looking at the merits of classifying it separately from the works of the same authors; others compare and contrast the content of the works, looking at various aspects that are comparable to established genres, like the autobiography. However, what is most noticeable about all the secondary sources on prison literature is that, despite the fact that critics recognize it as a distinct form of writing, none of them study it as a body of writing in its entirety. The critics still tend to look only at certain aspects of this writing. J. M. Coetzee, for example, examined prison poetry in his article “A Poet in Prison” in *New Republic* (1985) but got no closer to finding a means by which to define this unique form of writing.

From 1986, prison literature became more popular, especially in terms of the fact that it began to take on political overtones. Many critics, while accepting it as a unique form meriting individual attention, have kept the focus of their criticism principally on the political content and context of this literature. Jacobs has made an important contribution to the study of this branch of literature through the various articles that he has published. In 1986, he closely examined *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* in his article “Breyten Breytenbach and the South African Prison Book” (published in *Theoria*). The title of this article is perhaps misleading, because although the focus of the article is on the prison writing of Breytenbach, Jacobs not only includes a short survey of prison literature, but also a brief discussion on prison literature as a whole. Breytenbach is one of the forerunners of prison literature, and this is evidenced in the number of articles that have been written about his prison experience. Roberts added to this collection with “Breyten Breytenbach’s Prison Literature” in *The Centennial Review* (1986). In the two articles mentioned above, critics focus only on a particular prison-author.

Critics like Barbara Harlow drew attention to the fact that prison-authors were not exclusively male and began reading and writing about the female prison-authors. Harlow examined this writing in articles like “From
the Women’s Prison: Third World Women’s Narratives of Prison Feminist Studies”, which was published in 1986. Thus the focus of such authors was gender-specific, which, as we have seen, prison literature is not.

It is only after the end of apartheid in South Africa that many prisoners began to release their writings about their prison experiences and as a result the secondary sources about this literature grew in the 1990s. The year 1990 saw a wealth of criticism being written about this literature. Hermina van Vuuren presented a paper entitled “South African Prison Poetry and Breyten Breytenbach” (Auetsa Conference Papers). This paper is valuable to the study of prison literature, but difficult to use, because of the fact that authors like Breytenbach wrote in English and Afrikaans. The present study is devoted South African prison literature in English and therefore any commentary specific to Afrikaans writings must be excluded. In the same year, Cherry Clayton published “Post-colonial, Post-apartheid, Post-feminist: Family and State in Prison Narratives by South African Women” (Commonwealth Literary Cultures). This particular article is limited to discussion of political prisoners, but is invaluable in terms of the way in which she examines women, prisoners and prison narratives in a country in which all were disregarded. The last article to have been published on this topic in 1990 is Anthony D. Cavaluzzi’s “Exiled Within: Voices From South African Prisons” (Wasafiri). Gray says that by the time this article was written, prison literature had “become widely known as typical of a new African experience of oppression, that of the ‘exile within’” (1999: 35).

Jacobs published three articles on this topic in 1991: “Confession, Interrogation and Self-Interrogation in the New South African Prison Writing” (Kunapipi), “The Discourses of Detention: Book Reviews” (Current Writing) and “A Proper Name in Prison: Self-identification in the South African Prison Memoir” (Nomina Africana) all add value to this study because of the intensive commentary that Jacobs offers on the individual prison-authors and poets. The last of these articles makes reference to one of the common characteristics of prison literature which
will be discussed at length later in this study – that of awareness of self and self-identification within the prison system. This is an issue that can be found in all prison writing: prison-authors realize that their identity is either lost or completely changed by their prison experience. In all of these articles, Jacobs attempts to offer some criteria to assist in defining this writing and also continually cites many of the primary sources available. In “The Discourses of Detention”, Jacobs reviews both autobiographies and biographies of prison-authors. (Biographies are not included in this study because of the requirement of this study that the authors of the prison literature to be studied write about their prison experience themselves.)

Once again, in relation to the above we note that most critics have opted for a limited focus – studies on a theme or a form of writing only.

Many of the critics look at the works of specific authors rather than the theme of prison literature in general. This can be seen in D. Welsh’s “Mbeki: Notes from Robben Island” (Reality 1991), G. Gititi’s “Self and Society in Testimonial Literature: Caesarina Kona Makhoere’s No Child’s Play: In Prison under Apartheid” (Current Writing 1991) and G. Cuthbertson’s “A Tale of Two Jail Birds: Mandela and Sachs” (Kleio 1991). Cuthbertson examines the memoirs of Mandela and Sachs and comments on the way in which they were written rather than on what was written. He also reveals the historical value of both accounts. All of these authors look at the aspect of autobiography as found in prison literature while reviewing the writing of individual authors. The same is true of Dorothy Driver’s article “Imagined Selves (Un)imagined Marginalities”, in the Journal of Southern African Studies. However valuable these studies are, they offer merely a partial focus on what has become a large body of writing.

Kevin Goddard and Charles Wessels (eds.) make a valuable contribution to the study of prison literature in Out of Exile: South African Writers Speak (1992). This is a collection of interviews conducted with authors who went into exile during apartheid. Some of these writers were
imprisoned and wrote about their prison experience. Some of the interviews referred to this writing and the responses of the various prison-authors provide insight into their writings. The same value is added by Barbara Harlow’s *Barred: Women, Writing and Political Detention* (1992). Harlow’s focus on the writing of female prisoners gives both a sociological and psychological perspective to this unique writing. This book is a collection of essays on various issues dealing with women and political detention. It adds value to this study because of the chapter specifically allocated to South Africa and South African women’s prison writing. Along similar lines is the paper written by Ileana Dimitriu entitled “Anger and Joy: Strategies of Coping with Incarceration in South Africa and Romanian Prison Writing” (*Literature, Nature and the Land* – collected Auetsa conference papers). Jacobs’s contribution to the study of prison literature continued with his article “Narrating the Island: Robben Island in South African Literature” (*Current Writing*) in which he discusses Robben Island and its symbolic value of oppression during the apartheid years. M. C. Andersen’s “Stone Walls Do a Prison Make and Iron Bars a Cage”, published in *Acta Criminologica*, examines the prison life of prison-authors with special focus on Herman Charles Bosman and his novel *Cold Stone Jug*.

The most valuable article written in 1993 is Paul Gready’s “Autobiography and the ‘Power of Writing’: Political Prison Writing in the Apartheid Era” (*Journal of South African Studies*), which is a lengthy examination of various prison texts and prison-authors and how their writing can, to a certain extent, be considered to be autobiographical in nature. Gready also looks at the actual act of writing in or about prison and the reasons why the prisoners write. He suggests that writing provided a voice that was lost as a result of the authors’ incarceration and the system in which they found themselves. The value of this particular article also lies in the vast number of other issues that are covered by Gready. He looks at ideas that are common to most prison writing: the ideas of gender,
language, self-image and identity, racism and violence found within the prison system and the writings of prison-authors. This is, in my opinion, one of the first studies that comes close to dealing with prison literature and not an aspect or an author of prison literature on its own. Other articles and papers published in this year include Ileana Dimitriu’s “Prison Space and ‘the Carnivalesque’” (*Auetsa Conference Papers*), Pamela Ryan’s “Singing in Prison: Women Writers and the Discourse of Resistance” (*Journal of Literary Studies*) and Frank M. Chipasula’s “A Terrible Trajectory: The Impact of Apartheid, Prison and Exile on Dennis Brutus’ Poetry” (*Essays on African Writing*, edited by Abdulrazak Gurnah). The titles here are enough to manifest the specificity of the studies done thus far.

David Schalkwyk continues this focus on the writings of specific prison authors in his article “Confession and Solidarity in the Prison Writing of Breyten Breytenbach and Jeremy Cronin” (*Research in African Literatures* 1994). This article offers some interesting comparisons between the writings of Breytenbach and Cronin. This is a unique perspective because Breytenbach wrote a prison novel whereas Cronin wrote prison poetry. This article is therefore of value to the study of prison literature as a whole because it crosses over the boundaries between novels and poetry and shows how it is possible to successfully compare two such different forms of writing because of similarities in content. However, it is still limited as it only examines two genres and two authors. Gray states that, in writing this article, Schalkwyk has taken “Roberts’ grouping further, including many other writers who have endured prison to leave an account of it in various based-on-facts ways” (1999: 36). Schalkwyk argues the point that prison experience and the literature arising therefrom is homogeneous in nature. He acknowledges similarities in the experiences of prison-authors and their writing, as will this study, but notes the marked differences too.

The awareness of prison writing as well as the works that can be included begins to grow at a rapid rate after 1994. Sandra Young in “The Dynamic of Interrogation in Prison Narratives: The Position of the Reader
in the Reconstruction of this Subject” (*Inter Action* 1995) examines the works of First, Breytenbach and Mashinini in terms of the way they viewed themselves and their personal identity in their writings.

Oliver Lovesey published “Chained Letters: African Prison Diaries and ‘National Allegory’” (*Research in African Literatures* 1995) – an article I have found of particular use in this study. In this carefully constructed piece, Lovesey clearly shows the relationship between the prison diary, other prison writing and the use of metaphor. This will be discussed in detail in this study; suffice it to say here that the use of metaphor is common to South African prison literature and has thus become recognized as a common characteristic of this writing. Lovesey’s article is innovative because it compares the prison diary to other forms of prison writing and so overcomes some of the restrictedness of focus found in the earlier critical work. Lovesey also attempts to categorize prison writing but concludes that this body of writing comprises mixed genres. Ileana Dimitriu published “The Trickster and the Prison House: The Bakhtinian Dimension of ‘the Carnivalesque’ in Breyten Breytenbach’s *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*” (*Literator*) in which she examines the issue of laughter in prison. Like Ryan in “Singing in Prison”, she realizes that many coping mechanisms are used and written about by the prison-authors. Two such mechanisms are laughter and singing. She compares Breytenbach’s ‘gallows humour’ to that of the Bakhtinian ‘carnivalesque’, saying that laughter (like singing) served two purposes in prison – opposition to the authorities and spiritual renewal for the prisoner himself. The articles by Dimitriu and Ryan are yet further examples of work that has a very specific focus. The last article published in 1995 was Sandra Young’s “The Body of the Prison as Bearer of Pain” (*Inter Action* 1995).

In 1998, M. Keith Booker published the article “African Novel” in *Encyclopedia of the Novel*. It examines the rise of the African novel and does not have prison literature as its main focus but does include a list of writing that Booker refers to as “the prison genre” (1998: 32). David
Schalkwyk published “The Rules of Physiognomy: Reading the Convict in South African Prison Writing” (*Pretexts* 1989), in which he looked not only at the value of prison writing in terms of a study of literature, but began to focus on other aspects of the writing too, like the sociological side. He looks at the differences between political prisoners and criminal convicts and the stereotypes that can be found in this literature.

The most recent publications include Werner Sedlak’s “Ways of Appropriating Space in South African Prison Memoirs from Ruth First to Nelson Mandela”, which appeared in *Borderlands* (1999; edited by Monika Reif-Husler and Werner Sedlak). This article offers a comparative overview of how authors like First, Sachs, Makhoere, Breytenbach, Naidoo, Dlamini and Mandela wrote about the confined space in which they found themselves within the prison walls. This is a valuable article because Sedlak compares prisoners from different time periods, different genders and different prisons, even though he examines one facet of prison literature. Critics should perhaps make more use of this kind of comparison. It would be far too time-consuming to examine each facet of each prison-author’s writing in one study, but in an article such as Sedlak’s, if a representative list of prison-authors is included, then we will start the comprehensive study of a facet of prison literature as a whole. It must be noted how few critics include Bosman’s work in their comparisons: they tend to only include those prison-authors who were imprisoned for political reasons. The present study argues that *Cold Stone Jug* is pivotal to any study of prison literature, and this ‘recuperation’ of the ‘apolitical’ Bosman is a feature of this study that gives it value.

David Schalkwyk published “Writing from Prison” in *Senses of Culture: South African Cultural Studies* in 2000. This particular article details the relation of “prison to a broader concept of community and culture” (2000: 278). Schalkwyk argues that in the process of writing in and about prison the prison-author’s sense of community is affected by prison life and the reader of prison literature should be aware of this. He looks at
the writing of prison-authors like Breytenbach, Cronin and Lewin (among others) and discusses how prison writing manifests a prison community and the necessity thereof in order to survive. This sense of community, as identified by Schalkwyk, provides one of the many unique criteria by which prison literature can be classified. In the same year an article entitled “Community and Narration in Emma Mashinini’s Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life” was published in Alternation by Thomas Thale. Thale, like many of the other critics, examines the construction of self in Mashinini’s writing. This heightened awareness of female prison literature is continued in David Schalkwyk’s “Chronotypes of the Self in the Writings of Women Political Prisoners in South Africa” published in Apartheid Narratives. Here Schalkwyk examines the differences found when examining the literature of female prisoners. He argues that “all these differences shape the prison narrative in ways that constitute what Bakhtin has usefully called a chronotype…” (2001: 1).

The need to forget will be suggested as one of the reasons why many of these prisoners write. Guillaume Cingal examines this particular aspect of prison literature in “In an Attempt to Erase: Breyten Breytenbach’s Prison Writing and the Need to Recover” (Commonwealth Essays and Studies 2002). Cingal also examines the reasons why Breytenbach decided to write his prison novel in English rather than Afrikaans. This article is one of the most recent to be published on the topic of prison literature.

Apart from the secondary sources and websites available, some university students have completed studies on this topic. These studies began in 1989, with M. C. Andersen’s doctorate “Autobiographical Responses to Prison Experience.” She looked at how prisoners responded in written form to their incarceration. She also identifies elements of the writings that are common to prison literature as a whole. Andersen’s is an excellent study that makes a large contribution because of its focus on several representative prison-authors. But this too is subtitled “an examination of selected writings” (my emphasis) and thus does not offer a
complete overview of the literature in terms of autobiographical responses. Early studies such as this will also not be able to offer a more contemporary view of the literature, which is the advantage of the present study. The era of South African prison literature ‘ended’ over ten years ago and so the time is perhaps right to start a complete retrospective revaluation of this literature.

M. S. Aarons examined a variety of prison writing in her MA study entitled “Prison Experience in the Work of Some South African Writers” (1989). This is a valuable study in that it argues that there is no one particular form of writing used by prisoners (an assertion that is further substantiated in the present study). Prison-authors, Aarons notes, wrote about their experiences in novels, poetry, diaries or autobiographies. With Andersen and Aarons we can begin to see a development towards a broader view, but they themselves are still limited to “some” South African writers.

The focus of L. B. Mphahlele’s MA dissertation is reflected in its title: “The Prisoner as a Poet: Strategies of the Poem and the Art of Survival” (1991). In 1992 Hermina van Vuuren completed her master’s dissertation on “Poetry in Prison: A Study of Breyten Breytenbach’s Five Volumes of Prison Poetry in Translation.” This study was not used here because of the fact that Breytenbach’s poetry was originally written in Afrikaans. Both of these studies are very specific and although they add value to the study of prison poetry, they do not examine prison literature as a distinct literary phenomenon.

The study I have found to be of most use is Rosemary Folli’s master’s dissertation entitled “A Tent of Blue and Souls in Pain: Creative Responses to Prison Experience with Emphasis upon Existential and Autobiographical Elements within Selected South African Prison Writings” (1994). Although she too does not define this subsection of literature, she acknowledges its existence and offers some valuable commentary on various prison-authors. The limitation comes in with her focus on existential and autobiographical elements in only three prison writers. What is noteworthy, however, is the
fact that she too crosses genre boundaries by comparing a prison novel with prison poetry.

Sandra Young completed her master’s dissertation entitled “Negotiating Truth, Freedom and Self: The Prison Narratives of Some South African Women” in 1996. Here she looked at the prison narratives of political prisoners like Mashinini, Makhoere, First and Resha – with special emphasis on the autobiographical components of their writings. Again, hers is a limited study in terms of the gender specificity. V. Reddy’s master’s dissertation, “From Private Voice to Public Protest” (1997), looks at the prison diaries of Sachs, Thiong’o and Reitz. The focus of her discussion is how diaries, autobiographies, confessions and testimonies interlink. The above are both valuable studies in their own right but with a very specific focus in each case.

Gillian Booth-Yudelman discussed the relationship between politics and prison literature in her doctoral thesis “South African Political Prison-Literature between 1948 and 1990: The Prisoner as Writer and Political Commentator” (1997). This thesis comes closest to what is argued in my study, and Booth-Yudelman uses many of the sources that I have included (with the exception of the more recent ones, of course). Her focus on political literature and prison literature at the same time lends support to my argument that prison writing is closely related to political writing in South Africa. Her study has a limited focus, however, both in that it concentrates on politics and its starting date (1948) effectively excludes Herman Charles Bosman.

As the above survey indicates, a great deal has been written about South African prison literature. However, all of these studies focus on specific authors, forms of writing or characteristics of prison literature. None examines prison literature as a separate subsection of South African literature or includes Cold Stone Jug as a foundational text in this writing. No clear definition of this literature is offered, either. The present work attempts to synthesize all of the above primary and secondary material,
offer a definition of this body of literature and take within its purview the full range of South African prison literature in English.
CHAPTER THREE
DEFINING ‘PRISON WRITING’

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Paul Gready draws attention to the value of and necessity for the present study when he says that “prison writing . . . deserve[s] a hearing in numerous debates about detention and imprisonment, but little attempt has been made to unravel the ‘truth’ equation and identify ways in which prison writing should be read” (1993: 491). Gready appears to be suggesting that prison writing is a new category of writing that merits attention – not least because it does not have a well-established set of terminology relating to it, or a method of interpretation that can be used to describe or analyze it. The purpose of this study is to argue for a certain classification and interpretation of this body of writing in order to make the reading public more aware of prison literature and also to provide new ways of placing these works together to yield new insights, interpretations and perspectives. Before we can make sweeping generalizations about a new field or subsection of literature, however, we need to define the terms that will be used in this study.

3.2 PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

The definition that will be used here to define the term ‘genre’ is the one from *WordNet* (® 1.7): “genre is a kind of literary or artistic work, a style of expressing yourself in writing” (http://www.dict.org/bin.Dict). The first part of the definition implies that there are certain common features or characteristics of a body of literary works that mark them as being of a certain ‘kind.’ The second part says something about the mode or manner (‘style’) of this body of works. In this chapter a number of criteria will be
advanced for the classification of literary works as examples of ‘prison literature.’ Certain common features or characteristics will be identified that point to these works belonging to a recognizable corpus of writing. Attention will then be paid to the style or mode of these works.

A less slippery term is ‘prison.’ The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines prison as “a place in which a person is kept in captivity” (1984: 818). ‘Prison writing’, then, will be writing that has either been undertaken in this ‘place’ or that is about this ‘place.’ Prison-authors, in other words, are those who undertake writing while in prison, or who write about the experience afterwards. The importance of this definition is that it offers the idea of a physical place in which the prisoner is kept. This location often becomes the space in which the prisoner is writing, the hostile space of a prison cell.

An additional difficulty in arriving at a useful definition of ‘prison writing’ or ‘prison literature’ is that such a definition will have to be ‘cross-generic.’ Prison writing takes many forms: novels, memoirs / autobiography, poetry, biographical / sociological studies, and so on. In other words, it cuts across well-established, widely recognized genres. Can we, then, arrive at a definition that usefully identifies common features of ‘prison writing’ across so many genres?

Can we use any exclusionary measures? Prison-authors have written poetry, novels, letters, histories, documentaries, autobiographies and memoirs. Do we include just novels – and exclude poetry, letters and journals? Surely this is arbitrary and limiting – and therefore unacceptable. We must include in this body of work all types of writing that conform to the criteria established. Prisoners who detailed their daily experiences in a journal or in a diary will surely have made a valuable contribution to the body of prison literature and cannot be excluded. This writing will give intimate details of daily prison life from a personal experience; a view that the reader would not otherwise have gained. Very closely tied to the writing of a diary is the autobiography or prison memoir. We can exclude
autobiographies in which only a small portion of prison experience is included. An account of a person’s entire life is unlikely to be completely about prison experience. On the other hand, memoirs that deal only with time spent in prison will be included. This study thus accepts the fact that prison writing is not particular to any one genre or form. Whether it takes the form of a letter, novel or diary, writing that shares some of the common characteristics listed below, within the given exclusions and limitations, is classified here as prison literature.

Prison writing in the form of letters has an inherent problem for the literary scholar. Throughout the history of South African prisons severe censorship of all correspondence coming into or going out of the prison took place, and this has destroyed much of the writing that would have been of interest and importance. Dennis Brutus wrote to his sister while he was in prison and it was in these letters (Letters to Martha) that he encoded his prison poetry, works that, without a doubt, must be included in ‘prison writing.’

‘Literature’ is considered as being “written works” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary 1984: 588) and thus letters and diaries are part of prison literature. Another type of writing that is indisputably part of what is considered to fall within this definition of literature is poetry. More and more, students of literature are finding poetry valuable in terms of an in-depth literary study. It is an accepted fact that the writing of a novel is influenced by the societal context in which it was written; and, of course, the same is true of poetry. Therefore, poetry about prison experience is also influenced by the context in which it was written, and thus it makes a valuable contribution to the study of prison literature.

The novel is a popular form of literature and is more accessible to a wider readership. However, like all the other forms of writing to be included in this study, the prison novel cannot be clearly defined. This is because “these works violate the convention of private, introspective ‘self-writing’ in their insistence on the typicality of experience, and its social and
political context. Moreover, they are clearly mixed genres, with broken chronology, signs of extensive editing, and numerous editions” (Lovesey 1995: 33).

A study of these novels provides an image of apartheid South Africa that goes much deeper than that which is offered in the history books or tourist guides. Lewin says that, “it was only as a prisoner – as a bandiet in a South African jail – that I could begin to realize what life was like for most South Africans. I am white. I had to go inside to know what it’s like to be black” (2002: 8).

Prison literature cannot be defined purely in terms of genre because of the vast differences both between and within the genres mentioned above. Jacobs offers a categorization of prison writing that does help to demarcate the works to be included, but brings the student of prison literature no closer to a formal definition for this collection of writing. Jacobs provides a “taxonomy of African prison writing comprising five categories ranging from biographical works with accounts of detention or imprisonment to poetry and drama dealing with detention, imprisonment and interrogation” (Lovesey 1995: 41). This classification is referred to by Jacobs as being “tentative and by no means exhaustive, [giving] an indication of the range of this literature about imprisonment in South Africa” (1986: 96). The five categories include biographical works with accounts of detention or imprisonment, prison memoirs, fictional works in the form of prison memoirs, novels concerned with imprisonment, detention and interrogation, and poetry and drama dealing with detention, imprisonment and interrogation. This is a succinct method of categorizing prison literature, but it is not without problems. For the purposes of this study, the classification of prison literature entails writing from personal experience – thus biographies and fictional works will be excluded. But this particular taxonomy brings us no closer to a definition useful for this study – especially as some would argue that prison literature like Cold Stone Jug, for example, is a fictional work based largely on Bosman’s experience. This
‘autobiographical novel’ is fictional at times but much of what Bosman writes is true to his personal prison experience. The text is thus problematic, and no solution or formula will be offered in terms of how much fiction is permitted in the writing of a prisoner in order for it to be included into this corpus of literary works. Indeed, it is doubtful that scholars could ever arrive at consensus as regards when to consider a work as ‘fictional’ and when to consider it ‘non-fictional.’ Suffice it to say that this study notes these and other such complications, and will as far as possible explain in detail the reasons for the inclusion and exclusions of certain prison writings. Lovesey refers to this problem when he says that Jacobs’s “attempt to delineate a schematic range from history to fiction is problematic, as ‘historical’ works like Breytenbach’s True Confessions self-consciously use fictional techniques, and collections of poetry such as Dennis Brutus’s Letters to Martha and Jack Mapanje’s The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison are autobiographical” (1995: 41).

A further problem arises when one examines the crime of the prison-author. Some authors like Herman Charles Bosman were incarcerated for social crimes like murder whereas others like Hugh Lewin were imprisoned for political offences. The nature of the crime committed profoundly affects the prisoner’s attitude to his or her incarceration. A common criminal may more readily accept the justice of his term in prison, whereas a political prisoner will (almost always) feel that his incarceration is entirely unjust. And these diverse attitudes will undoubtedly influence the writing that emanates from the experience of imprisonment.

Prison literature in South Africa also spans many decades. This, too, is problematic because, as was mentioned in Chapter One, the prison system in South Africa has changed over the years, and thus the conditions about which these prison-authors have written would be different. With these difficulties in mind, one can see how challenging a task it is to come up with a clear-cut definition of prison literature.
3.3 INADEQUATE ATTEMPTS AT DEFINING PRISON LITERATURE

The prison novel has been referred to as “interdisciplinary” (Sobanet 2002: 1), and “as having artful intersections between other genres” (2002: 2). This further reinforces the notion that it is impossible to provide a watertight definition of prison literature – and that, moreover, any attempt to create one would be completely futile. Sobanet suggests that writing found in the prison novel “blurs distinctions between disciplines and genres” (2002: 1). Jacobs says, “a semiotic analysis of the South African prison memoir reveals certain salient characteristics” (1986: 116), but offers no comprehensive definition. It is not possible to arrive at a watertight, trans-generic, trans-historical definition of prison writing. Gready underlines this when he refers to prison writing as a means by which to explore “higher truths” that are not “mutually exclusive nor are they exhaustive, they encompass elements of both the familiar and the unique…” (1993: 522).

Instead of attempting to define the literature this study will offer a set of common features or characteristics that can be found in prison writing. These are characteristics that I have identified. Jacobs says that, “the actual narrative of the detention or prison process has identifiable contours” (1994: 1314). These common features manifest themselves clearly. Although there is no clinical, scientific definition according to which this writing can be categorized, a set of characteristics or criteria can be advanced – and this allows for the clustering of certain works together in a way that facilitates analysis and provides useful insights. The point is that prison literature is made up of individual works from a variety of genres, and one is therefore unable to conceive of this miscellaneous collection of works as constituting a ‘genre.’ Prison writing, rather, is a multi-generic miscellany held together only by setting and (in some respects) style – including the autobiographical element, the language used, the mode of narration, etc. Indeed, it is the
setting that in fact makes the strongest case for such a study and the inclusion of the multi-generic writings found in this thesis. As will be seen in the conclusion, all prison writing is set in prison, a hostile space for the prison author. Not all of the characteristics set out below will be found in all examples of South African prison writing, but all of this writing was written in and about prison. Thus it is irrelevant whether the writing is a novel, a poem or a letter: it is set in a hostile space, a prison, both literal and figurative, and that is the vital link for the entire study.

3.4 COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF PRISON WRITING

3.4.1 The autobiographical element

Perhaps the most important common feature is the autobiographical element. Through the use of autobiography, a distinctive documentary style can be identified in this writing. Andrew Sobanet states that “the texts which fall into the sub-genre of the prison novel represent artful intersections of autobiography and fiction, and their narrators often attempt to be sociological in their precision when observing and depicting the nature of conditions and relations behind bars” (2002: 1). We can see from this that Sobanet, like other critics mentioned earlier, does not offer a comprehensive definition of prison writing either: he is not able to pinpoint, in essence, exactly what prison literature is. This is further evidenced by the fact that many prison novels are classified in a library system under criminology and sociology, suggesting that librarians consider these texts to be interdisciplinary in nature. In the case of South African prison literature, the novels include the disciplines of sociology, criminology, psychology, history as well as autobiography. The inclusion of so many disciplines within the body of prison literature highlights the diverse nature of this literature.
The question is then whether these novels cannot be simply classified as autobiographies. My feeling is that this does not do justice to their unique character: they can, at best, be considered a complex subset of the genre ‘autobiography.’ Properly defined, an autobiography contains the essential notion that this writing constitutes a life story. We see this in James Olney’s definition of the word ‘autobiography.’ He divides the word into its three components: ‘autos’ meaning self, ‘bios’ signifying life and ‘graphe’ denoting the act of writing (1980: 4). This definition makes it obvious that prison writing cannot be regarded as purely autobiographical in nature because of the fact that a personal prison experience is only a facet of a life story. Autobiographies as a genre have come to be accepted as a factual account of the author’s own life. This ‘self-biographical’ form has become so popular as to be regarded as a genre on its own. As a result of the growth in this particular sub-genre of literature, two schools of thought concerning its permissible methods have arisen. There “are those critics who continue to insist that autobiography must employ biographical – which is to say historical rather than fictional – materials. On the other hand there are those who assert the right of autobiographers to present themselves in whatever form they might find appropriate and necessary” (Spengemann 1980: xii). The prison writers may choose to write in either of the above-mentioned ways – either by a personal narrative or by fictionalizing the characters in the novel but including autobiographical material. Thus we must conclude that there are only elements of autobiography in prison literature and that ‘prison literature’ is not therefore to be conflated with the category ‘autobiography.’

### 3.4.2 Sociological elements

Secondly, prison literature generally tends to include sociological elements – an exploration of prison issues and conditions of incarceration is unique to this type of writing. Prison writing reveals personal responses to
prison and the reality of the situation in which the author finds him or herself. Prison writing also allows the prisoner to highlight issues in the prisons and the conditions under which the prison-authors are expected to either rehabilitate or spend the rest of their earthly lives. These issues include the harsh treatment of prisoners, various categories of prisoners and the mundane day-to-day routine of prison life. In doing this prison writing becomes a sociological loudspeaker for the prisoner. Sobanet says, “the sociological element of prison novels in general is reinforced due to the fact that these novels borrow their authority from real-life experience” (2002: 3). Because real-life experience is depicted in prison literature, this writing is often regarded as non-fictional in nature. A closer look at what Sobanet states causes some confusion in this matter because these “novels have borrowed their authority from real-life experience.” There is a suggestion of tautology in this statement. As previously mentioned, writing on real-life experience would be regarded as non-fiction, but the word novel implies writing that is fictitious in nature. This brings us to the next similarity in the classification of prison literature – the interplay between fiction and non-fiction. As mentioned previously, this distinction is problematic – even more so because of the fact that the notion that there is a hard-and-fast distinction between ‘fiction’ and ‘non-fiction’ is fallacious.

3.4.3 Interplay between fiction and non-fiction

We find interplay between fiction and non-fiction in this writing, where at times the prison-author brings reality to light through an imagined character. While the author is dealing with reality in his or her writings, he or she manipulates the characters and some of the happenings within the prison in order to suit his or her purpose: thus one cannot classify such an example of prison writing as purely fiction or non-fiction. It has been said that prison writing “is a particularly fruitful sub-genre for interdisciplinary study due to its artful negotiation of the boundary between fiction and non-
fiction” (Bordt 2002: 2). Many novelists do in fact use creative licence to alter source material, so this is not a unique quality of prison writing. What is unique, however, is the source material that is being altered – that is, the real-life experience of a South African prison.

Often the fiction complements the source material that is being used in this writing, giving prison literature an atmosphere of reality to which the reader can relate. The horrors of prison life as experienced by the authors are often unpalatable to the ordinary reader and so this problem is addressed and solved through the inclusion of fiction. The authors are attempting to answer the question of what prison life was like for them and write to share an experience or to use the voice that they are no longer afforded as a prisoner. This writing fulfils a more psychological need than a desire on the part of the author for fame and fortune. By including some fiction, the authors are inviting their readers into a reality to which they can relate. The interplay between fiction and non-fiction means that it is not possible for this literature to be brought within a single classification.

3.4.4 Historical Value

Works that are classified as falling within the discipline of history offer themselves to the reader as purely ‘factual’ works. Now, while it clearly cannot masquerade as history, prison writing will have elements of historical truth in it. Through manipulation of the happenings within the prison, these ‘facts’ are not always historically correct, though, and this makes it impossible to class prison literature as belonging solely to the genre of historical writings. History is defined as a “continuous methodical record, in order of time, of important or public events” (The New Oxford Illustrated Dictionary: 1978: 797). This is only a working definition for the exclusive use of this study, and due cognizance must be taken of the fact that the whole issue of what ‘history’ / ‘historical writing’ is, is highly contentious. Be that as it may, prison literature does not completely adhere
to the general definition of historical works and can be considered as only partly historical. The fact that the prison-author also tends to add a human element to his writing, as discussed under the criteria of sociology above, would undermine the idea that this writing is purely historical in character – where history is understood to be an unimpassioned, ‘objective’ statement about past events. This once again shows the difficulty of providing a clear-cut definition of prison writing; at the same time this reveals another trait that can be found in most prison writing – an attempt, at least partially, to provide some sort of ‘historical’, ‘factual’ account.

3.4.5 First-person narration

Prison writings are predominantly narrated in the first person. This is done either by the author directly, or by another character who represents the author. Through first-person narrative, the authors weave an intricate tale of their prison experiences. Often the narrator is a fictionalized character representing the author him or herself. The fact that a first-person narrator is used in this writing in order to recount the prison experience is, like many of the other criteria mentioned here, not unique to prison literature, of course, but merely one of the common characteristics which must be noted.

3.4.6 The Art of Writing

The next common feature is the transformation of personal experience into art – a factor true of all literature, music and art. For the literary scholar this must be the most important attribute of prison writing. A definition of the notion of ‘writing’ lacks specificity, but for the purposes of this study, we will accept ‘writing’ as “a piece of literary work” (*The New Oxford Illustrated Dictionary*: 1978: 1903). Once again we must consider this
definition rather loosely. This art is being created in a prison or as a result of imprisonment.

3.4.7 Prison culture and diction

The culture in which these writers found themselves is unique. The author must have been imprisoned to experience the unique culture of a prison. This directly ties in with the diction that is found in prison literature. This, too, is unique to prison literature and comes about as a direct result of the culture in which the writers find themselves. The cultural system of a prison is unlike any other experienced outside of prison. This fact is true of many environments but I would like to suggest that prison must be considered as being, by almost any standards, highly unusual. Thus by writing about and experiencing this culture, the authors open up a new world to most readers. In prison culture “there is little or no spontaneity in the ritual, the social hierarchy is tightened, not relaxed, and if identities are sometimes played with they are more often negotiated. But the prison culture is in another sense a culture that is set apart from everyday culture, establishing a creative, experiential scheme in dealing with its own everyday world” (Davies 1990: 11). This quotation sums up this common characteristic quite succinctly. The fact that this culture is “set apart from everyday culture” strengthens the notion that this particular facet of the writing is distinctive of prison literature. It also reminds the reader that the prison-author is in fact in a hostile space.

Together with any culture, in or out of prison, comes a language. Obviously the authors to be examined in detail wrote in English, but as a result of their prison experience they incorporate in the language with a diction that they came across and used in prison. An interesting fact about prison writing is that, for the scholar of English language, such writings would be nothing less than abominable. Many of the authors in question were not schooled writers and often wrote straight from the heart with little
consideration for grammar. In arguing for the recognition of this writing, the purpose is not to create a new ‘canon’ and thereby bestow weighty judgments about literary value on these texts; it is rather is to subject these texts to careful scrutiny and to determine their place in South African prison literature.

Many of the authors who will be regarded as prison-authors wrote in a language that was not their mother tongue. This is true not only in the case of African writers whose mother tongue might have been Sotho, Zulu or one of the other African languages found in South Africa; it is also true of authors like Breytenbach. If one is to contextualize the time in which many African political prisoners were incarcerated, it would be found that they were products of the substandard Bantu Education system, which could explain any failings that a language expert would find in their writings. I believe that it is often the raw simplicity with which these experiences were written that makes this collection so unique – it is this that brings both the reality and harshness of prison across to the reader. The diction used in these writings is unique and, although not always grammatically sound, is often a replica of the way in which the prisoners communicated with each other. Of course, there is nothing distinctive about this on its own, because much of the protest writing of the 70s and 80s has this feature. What makes it distinctive is that, when combined with some of the other criteria as suggested in this chapter, prison diction becomes one of the identifying characteristics of this literature. Driver (1975: 111) refers to Zwelonke’s *Robben Island* as often very badly written and riddled with discontinuity: episodes do not relate to each other and there are shifts in point of view that are often confusing, among other faults. But Driver goes on to say that it has a “direct simple accuracy which neither local failings nor the failings of the book as a whole can obscure; and throughout the book one comes across passages of equal power.” Thus we can see that, despite errors in language and structure, prison writings have a compelling message that must be given a voice.
Mikhail Bakhtin examined the nature of stories and offered three definitions in this regard. The first element deals with how prison culture is set apart from everyday culture, a ‘carnival’ in which the prisoners are forced to become actors in what can be referred to as a “ritual spectacle” (Davies 1990: 11). Secondly, he suggests that stories are made up of comic verbal compositions both oral and written. His third element of analysis is vital to the study of this literature. He refers to curses, oaths, ‘blazons’ as a form of billingsgate (the language of the market). In prison this can easily be identified with prison jargon. The main characteristic of this language is the terminology that is coined by the prisoners themselves for those in authority and their fellow inmates. In South Africa the prison wardens are often referred to as ‘bulls’ or ‘rats’ while other prisoners are referred to as ‘fish’ or ‘wolves’, depending on their status within the prison system. The prisoners create a whole new language of their own, describing people and situations in prison, and this language is always included in the writing in order to create the atmosphere of prison life as it was experienced by the authors themselves. Individual prisons will obviously add a particular terminology to this language and over time some terms are given different meanings or changed altogether, but for the most part prison argot does not change when one reads the writings of different prisoners coming from different institutions.

The use of ‘billingsgate’ as invoked by Bakhtin “does not merely refer to localized terminology but ultimately to conceptions of the body, to the use of epithets, double meanings which together relate to a view of the world which celebrates the underworld, an alternative set of values and meanings which defy the superior inscriptions and perhaps even go beyond the parodic” (Davies 1990: 14). This is certainly true of the diction of prison writing. The fact that many of the terms used by the prisoners to describe themselves were names of animals shows a very negative view of the body. Should one examine the subconscious meanings of the terms used in prison to describe self, others and situations, one would certainly find, as
suggested by Bakhtin, “an alternative set of values and meanings”. The purpose of this study, however, is not to offer an extensive psychoanalysis of the language of prisoners but rather to acknowledge that this language does exist and show how it is another common characteristic to be noted.

### 3.4.8 Theories of prison literature

There is no one theoretical approach that suggests itself as appropriate to the analysis of prison literature, and this further exacerbates the difficulties of defining this literature. We have seen how prison literature is interdisciplinary and crosses over many genres. The same is true of its theoretical classification. If no one theory can be used to explain prison literature, then a theoretical basis does not provide a means by which to define these writings. Despite this fact, it is important to recognize the theoretical bases of prison literature because they, like the characteristics examined above, form a part of the criteria that can be used to typify prison writings. One of the aims of this study is to create a base of common characteristics that can be found in prison literature. Theories common to prison literature must be included in this list too.

The discussion that follows examines a number of theories, elements of which are useful in analyzing the writing of prison-authors. A comprehensive study of the theory of prison literature could provide a more detailed discussion on the theories mentioned here and possibly include other less predominant theories as well. The purpose here, however, is to introduce a few of the more common theoretical perspectives on prison literature and to show in basic terms how all of them can be used to aid the reading and understanding of this literature.
3.4.8.1 Existentialism

Above all, prison literature is existentialist in nature. Cuddon defines existentialism as “a vision of the condition and existence of man, his place and function in the world” (1991: 251). An existential dimension is common to most literary works but is particularly apposite to prison literature. The ‘world’ in which the prison-author has to find his place and function is completely different from the norm. This definition ties in with the autobiographical nature of prison writing, in that the act of autobiography, says Olney, “constitutes a bringing to consciousness . . . the nature of one’s own existence . . . ” (1972: 44). The common factor, then, between the autobiographical nature of prison writing and the theory of existentialism is the idea of ‘existence.’ The prison-author is attempting, through his writing, to explain and understand his existence within the context of the prison. Language and writing is the means by which the prisoner is able to explore the unknown as experienced through his or her incarceration. Because the prison writing examined here must necessarily be about the personal experience of the prison-author, it can be argued then that it is in fact existentialist in nature because the prison-author is detailing his or her ‘place and function’ in the prison world in which he or she finds him or herself. Existentialism is also important to the notion that this thesis introduces of prison being a hostile space in both literal and figurative terms. It is a new world in which the prison-authors are writing, one which is unknown, unfriendly and unaccepting – a hostile world in which he or she has to function.

Frankl views existentialism as a life-enhancing philosophy. His view is that what is demanded of humankind is not to “endure the meaningless of life but rather . . . to grasp its . . . meaningfulness” (1962: 120). He goes on to say that humanity is driven towards finding meaning in life, and that this is usually unique and specific to each individual. This is certainly true of the prison-authors. Part of their lives was a period spent in jail. This was a new
way of life with new value systems that they had not previously encountered. In order to understand and to accept this ‘new life’, the prisoner has to comprehend the meaning of being a prisoner and of the prison system. The journey taken to reach this understanding must be regarded as existentialist in nature because the prisoner is searching for the meaning in his or her current existence. The prison-author maps out this search for meaning in his or her writing that is unique and specific to each author. This will be illustrated when individual works are discussed later.

The prisoner is acutely aware of life and death while incarcerated. There is a constant awareness of danger in the prison system – especially for the earlier writers, who were incarcerated while the death penalty was still in existence. These prisoners were faced with death on a daily basis, whether in conversation, threats or the actual act in the execution of their fellow inmates. For Heidegger, existentialism is a “philosophy which meditates on what it feels like to be alive” (Eagleton 1996: 54). This once again shows how prison literature is existentialist in nature. It can be argued that when one is keenly aware of death, one must be just as conscious of life. Heidegger goes on to say that “human existence is a dialogue with the world” (Eagleton 1996: 54), which is particularly true in the case of prison literature, with the ‘world’ being the prison and all that is experienced therein.

In summary, then, humankind is ceaselessly engaged in a process of finding meaning for human existence, and so the existentialist dimension that I have been arguing for prison writing is by no means unique to this body of writing. However, the extremely hostile space that prison indubitably represents makes a search for the meaning of human existence particularly appropriate as a mode of writing about this space.
3.4.8.2 New Historicism

New historicist theory offers useful insights into prison writing. A simple definition of new historicism is that “it is a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period. That is to say, new historicism refuses to ‘privilege’ the literary text: instead of a literary ‘foreground’ and a historical ‘background’ it envisages and practices a mode of study in which literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight and constantly inform and interrogate each other” (Barry 1995: 172). This can be seen in prison literature in terms of both the historical and political background in which the prison-authors are writing. Barry argues that the historical documents should not be regarded as ‘contexts’ but rather as ‘co-texts.’ “The text and the co-text . . . will be seen as expressions of the same historical ‘moment’ and interpreted accordingly” (1995: 173).

New historicism is important in relation to prison literature because of the equal weighting it gives to non-literary texts. In the past these texts were used merely as part of a background study in the understanding of a literary text. This is no longer adequate or appropriate. Prison literature in South Africa is often considered to be synonymous with political literature because, for the most part, the prisoners who have contributed to the corpus of prison writing have been imprisoned because of their political affiliations or involvement. This being so, it is impossible to study this literature without including a ‘parallel’ examination of the political history of South Africa at the same time. The prison-authors make mention of laws that they ignored and include politically inspired incidents of which they were a part. Even the rigorous questioning and trials to which they were subjected were a result of their political standing and the country’s policies of the time.

“New historicism is resolutely anti-establishment, always implicitly on the side of liberal ideas of personal freedom and accepting and celebrating all forms of difference and ‘deviance’” (Barry 1995: 175). Not only does
this definition tie in with the personal views of the majority of the political prison-authors, who too, for the most part, were “anti-establishment” in terms of the apartheid policies of the South African government, but it also ties in with the prison system as a whole. The survival of personal freedom and anti-establishment ideals is virtually impossible because of the power of the state. Michel Foucault, a post-structuralist cultural historian, picks up on this notion of prison being all-powerful in terms of his idea of ‘panoptic surveillance.’ This ties in directly with prison literature because the ‘Panopticon’ was a design for a circular prison in the eighteenth century. Jeremy Bentham designed prisons in such a way as to allow a single warder the ability to survey the entire prison because of the tiered ranks of cells. This illustrates the all-powerful, all-seeing power of the state, which negates the personal freedom for which the new historians hope. (This idea is expounded on in the conclusion in terms of the panopticon prison being part of the hostile space in which the prisoner finds him or herself.) Foucault’s writings “have consistently shown how so-called objective historical accounts are always products of a will to power enacted through formations of knowledge within specific institutions” (Rice 1998: 229), like the prison.

As mentioned earlier, a typical piece of prison literature will include some form of ‘history.’ In the past, historiography was regarded as “a form of narration conditioned by the narrator’s own prejudices and preoccupations, and so itself a kind of rhetoric or fiction” (Eagleton 1996: 196). To a certain extent I believe this still to be true in terms of prison literature because the prison-author will be prejudiced against the system that imprisoned him or her. This bitterness will be evident in the way in which the writer refers to prison warders, judges, police and the political establishment as a whole. This form of historiography, however, has resulted in no single determinable truth being given to any particular narrative or event. This is true in the case of both literary and non-literary texts. New historicism solves this problem with the suggestion of a parallel study of both texts.
3.4.8.3 Stylistics

Another important theory that I believe adds to the understanding of prison literature is stylistics. Stylistics, developed in the twentieth century, aims “to show how the technical linguistic features of a literary work, such as the grammatical structure of its sentences, contribute to its overall meanings and effects” (Barry 1995: 202). This can be applied to prison literature because stylistic critics describe technical aspects of the language of the text to provide data to support existing readings or intuitions about a literary work. In the case of prison literature, stylistics can be applied to the unusual diction and sentence structures that are used by the prison-author. The unique style of writing and diction found in prison literature were discussed earlier. Stylistic critics add value to the analysis of such literature by pointing out how the prisoner’s state of mind is manifested in his or her writing and how comprehensively his or her style of writing differs from that of a non-prisoner.

Stylistics also introduces the idea of ‘under-lexicalization,’ which is a term used by Roger Fowler. It refers to “cases where there is a lack of an adequate set of words to express specific concepts” (Barry 1995: 214). I would argue that under-lexicalization is evident in the diction of the prison-author in that descriptive terminology is used to refer to an ordinary commonplace object; but in prison the accepted term could refer to something completely different. A warder is a commonplace character in a prison, often referred to by the prisoners as a ‘screw.’ This descriptive prison terminology assigns meanings to words that are completely different from the accepted meanings. The fact that the terminology used has a negative connotation not only gives valuable information about the prisoners’ feelings and opinions of the warders, but also shows how the prisoner no longer perceives the world in a ‘socially acceptable way.’ This is only one example among many of under-lexicalization that can be found
in prison literature. The prisoners’ psychological state of being can be explained by examining their use of under-lexicalization. The under-lexicalization is the data that is collected and its interpretation can provide valuable information about the narrator or author. In the case of a prison-author, I would like to suggest that the use of under-lexicalization would be interpreted by a stylistician as the “[writer’s or prisoner’s] character’s inability to perceive the world in socially acceptable ways, as most other people do” (Barry 1995: 216).

There are many linguistic effects that can be found in prison writing and each of them can be examined for meaning. This is especially true when a text or part of it is logically and emotionally distorted and fragmented – as is often evident in the writing of prisoners. Stylistics therefore, whether regarded as a literary theory or literary practice, is invaluable to the study of prison literature.

3.4.9 Thematic concerns

The final criterion that will be examined is the thematic concerns of prison writing. One almost always finds that these authors deal with violence, death and some type of spiritual awareness in their writing. The inclusion of these themes can be found in other genres, but the fact that all three are found in prison writing makes the thematic concerns of prison literature valuable. Prison-authors deal with issues in their writings that give them a voice that they would otherwise not be afforded within the prison system. Sociological and autobiographical issues are two themes particular to this writing that have already been dealt with in this chapter. But there are other themes that are particular to this writing separating it from other works.
3.4.9.1 Violence

Firstly, prison writing is often about violence. This can take the form of literal violence that the author observes or experiences within the prison. As mentioned in Chapter One, prisons in South Africa were, and to a certain extent still are, violent places. Early prisons saw violence coming from those in charge through physical violence on the bodies of the prisoners as well as internal violence among the prisoners themselves. Rape, assault and battery are experienced by and written about by the authors. Verbal abuse is also a characteristic of South African prisons and can be considered a type of violence. Violence is a theme found across many genres but it is necessarily a theme in prison literature. The violence experienced brings to the prisoners an overwhelming and continuous awareness of death. This then also becomes a theme common to prison literature.

3.4.9.2 Awareness of Death

The prisoner becomes aware of the death of others as well as the possibility of his own death. This awareness must start with the fact that some of the prisoners have deliberately caused the death of others and have been incarcerated as a result. In early prison writing we see how prisoners are aware of death as the death sentence was still being imposed on many. This brought a daily awareness of impending death into the prison and thus into the writing coming from the prisons. It is often found in psychological studies of prisoners that this sense of death brings with it an acute cognizance of life after death. For some this is no more than a fear that they push away, while for others it becomes an issue of spirituality, another theme that is characteristic of prison literature.
3.4.9.3 Other common themes

The other themes that are common to prison literature are discussed at length in the respective examinations of individual works. Thus it will suffice merely to make mention of these themes here. Imprisonment brings about a heightening of the senses, and throughout the literature it can be seen how the prison-authors become acutely aware of commonplace issues such as time. They also focus on the issue of separation – whether from family, friends or the outside world in general. Prisoners are aware of being on the ‘inside’, which naturally emphasizes the issue of freedom. In prison each prisoner is given a number and, in receiving that number, the prisoner’s own sense of identity undergoes a profound change. As a result this heightened awareness an examination of self and self-identification ensues. Laughter and singing become means through which the prisoners can communicate and find some sense of hope while passively opposing the system in which they find themselves. Prison writing also tends to make use of metaphor and symbolism. Each author may find a unique way in which to bring an image across but the commonality lies in the fact that images are being used in the first place. Common symbols include birds, mirrors and stars.

Another common strand is identified by Jacobs. He says that elements of “the DDD syndrome can be found in varying degrees in most South African accounts of detention and prison books, [they] are also subsumed into the psychiatric classification of the post-traumatic stress disorder, the clinical features of which are amply documented in these works” (1991(2): 123). The DDD syndrome is a Western classification of the psychological changes that a prisoner undergoes in prison. (This is according to Dr Louis J. West in Effects of Isolation on the Evidence of Detainees.) The abbreviation stands for Debility, Dependency and Dread, themes that are common throughout prison literature.
These are the common characteristics that are found in prison literature, and by virtue of which prison literature can be identified as a distinct literary corpus. I am not implying that, for a piece of literature to be considered an example of prison literature, it must adhere to all of these criteria. I would suggest that these criteria be used as a guideline for the classification of prison literature and that several of these aspects should be found in order for writing to be considered to fall into this category. But how were these common characteristics or criteria established in the first place? One has to examine the history of prison literature in order to answer this. This study will suggest that in the writing and publishing of *Cold Stone Jug* by Herman Charles Bosman the foundation for these common features was laid. This will be looked at in detail in Chapter Five. Apart from common characteristics that can be found in prison literature, no matter the form it takes, there are limitations which will make it easier to distinguish between the prison literature examined here, and literature about prison.

### 3.5 Exclusions and Limitations

For the purposes of this study, we accept prison writing to be that which is written about a prison experience by the prison-author him- or herself, but it does not necessarily have to be written in prison. To enforce such a constraint on prison literature would be senseless. Early prison conditions did not make writing possible in that no writing tools were provided or allowed. Many authors writing about prison outside of prison about a personal prison experience have made valuable contributions to this corpus of works and cannot be excluded.

The most famous example of this must be Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug*. Bosman wrote this prison novel many years after he was released from prison. In the novel he says that he was unable to write while in prison. The reasons for this are manifold. He began serving his time in prison on death row, where no writing implements were provided for these prisoners, and,
when he was later moved into the main cells of the prison, he felt emotionally and psychologically unfit to write. The emotion that accompanies incarceration was a huge obstacle for Bosman in terms of his writing. Not only was he dealing with a possible life sentence but also had to adjust to a *lebensraum* that was completely different from that which he was used to. He was living in a hostile space. He was surrounded by hardened criminals, was treated inhumanely by the prison warders and became the focus of attention of a homosexual inmate. These conditions, among others, blocked his ability to write. Despite the fact that Bosman was not writing in prison, he was imprisoned and therefore his account of his incarceration in *Cold Stone Jug* has to fall within the ambit of prison literature. Emma Mashinini, like Bosman, found her detention so traumatic that she could only start writing about it after her release. She records her prison experience in * Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* and only began to write after receiving therapy at a Danish centre for the rehabilitation of torture victims. Nevertheless, her novel must also be considered prison writing.

### 3.5.1 Writing from personal experience

Two limitations are going to be placed on this writing. These limitations have been imposed by me personally and are by no means automatic or self-evident. Within these two limitations on works that may share the common characteristics listed above, the body of literature that is included in this study becomes more manageable and clearly recognizable as prison literature. Most importantly, we must examine the question that all of these authors are attempting to answer in writing about their prison experiences: what is prison life like? Thus we must state at this point that for a novel to be classed as prison literature, the author must have had a personal experience of prison. It does not matter whether the author writes in or out of jail, just that he or she has undergone the nightmares of being
imprisoned and that the content of the writing must be about prison experience.

One must bear in mind that the essential factor is that the author was imprisoned and so can write from a personal perspective. In terms of a psychological study, this is referred to as participant observation. Gold, a psychologist studying social research methods, would identify someone like Bosman (and other prison-authors) as ‘full participants’ in terms of participant observation. The prison-author plays the role of researcher when recording, in his or her writings, all that he or she observes. Authors of ‘prison literature’ who themselves were not incarcerated will not be included in this study because the content of their works, although thematically appropriate, does not adhere to the requirements of the classification as set out in this study. This type of writing becomes as artificial as a laboratory experiment, because only when a researcher participates in an actual social event can he or she obtain an extensive in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon. This is true with regard to the essential attribute of personal prison experience. The sociologists Haralambos and Holborn describe “participant observation as the best way of studying interaction. A lot of interaction is instinctive or impulsive and this kind of detail is not clear from, for example, interviews” (UNISA study guide for Criminology 101). “Prison writing has established a tradition and discourse, narrative design and identifiable contours in which prison accounts (and other writings) find a ‘wealth of resonances’ and a ‘discursive context’. One of the most familiar features of the ‘discursive content’ is the need to be a witness . . .” (Gready 1993: 522).

3.5.2 Writing about prison

The next question that needs to be dealt with is whether or not the literature written by the prison-authors must necessarily be about prison and
prison experience in order to be included in this study. This is a troublesome issue in that, according to the characteristics set up in this chapter, much of this writing could be considered prison literature and, as previously mentioned, literature that adheres to most of the common characteristics must be considered prison literature. The prison-authors have complied with the first requirement used to define prison writing in that they were themselves prisoners. So must we for the purpose of this study examine the actual content of their writing in order to classify it into this body of writing? It is very possible for a prison-author to write a novel about a period in his life before prison that refers to the political regime of the country. This novel would thus be considered autobiographical, have historical themes and be written in the first person, thereby fulfilling three of the criteria suggested in defining the limits and scope of prison literature. Such hypotheses could go on forever and theoretically such a work should be considered prison writing as a result. Let us examine a concrete example of such literature. If we examine the poetry of Jeremy Cronin as found in his anthology *Inside*, it is quite clear that exclusions have to be made. Cronin wrote a number of love poems to his wife while in prison and the fact that he was imprisoned means that this work falls within the definition discussed at the beginning of this chapter. On closer examination one can see that these particular poems, like the hypothetical example given earlier, also adhere to many of the criteria as suggested in this chapter. In a poem like “Faraway City, There…”, which was written to his wife while he was incarcerated, one can see that to a certain extent it is autobiographical, historical and written in the first person by the prison-author.

Faraway city, there
with salt in its stones
under its windswept doek,

There in our Cape Town where
they’re smashing down homes
of the hungry, labouring people
will you wait for me, my love?

In that most beautiful
desolate city of my heart
where if staying on were passive
life wouldn’t be what it is.

Not least for those rebuilding
yet again their demolished homes
with bits of plastic, Port Jackson saplings,
anything to hand – unshakeably

Defiant, frightened, broken,
and unbreakable are the people of our city.

Will you wait for me, my love?

(New Inscapes 1991: 235)

This poem, among many other works by prison-authors, must
necessarily be excluded from the body of what is going to be considered as
prison writing. Just as it is a necessity that the authors who are going to be
included within this corpus of works must have been imprisoned in order to
have their works included, it is vital that this writing also be about prison.
One cannot include love poems or any other genres into the classification of
prison writing because in doing so one would completely defeat the object
of creating common criteria according to which these writings can be
classified.
The name of this body of work should in itself show its exclusivity because in the word ‘prison’ one can see that not all writings can be included. In introducing this exclusion, much of what has been and still is being written in prison will not even be considered in this study. One must therefore make a clear distinction between ‘prison writing’ and ‘prisoners’ writing’, the latter accepting a far larger scope and body of work, while the first is the exclusive focus of this study.

Cronin’s poem “I Saw Your Mother” would therefore be considered an example of prison writing in that it was written by someone who was imprisoned and is about a particular prison experience.

I saw your mother
with two guards
through a glass plate
for one quarter hour
on the day that you died.

‘Extra visit, special favour’
I was told, and warned
‘The visit will be stopped
if politics is discussed.
Verstaan – understand!’?
on the day that you died.

I couldn’t place
my arm around her,
around your mother
when she sobbed.

Fifteen minutes up
I was led
back to the workshop.
Your death, my wife,
one crime they managed
not to perpetrate
on the day that you died.

(New Inscapes 1991: 236)

Like the first poem, this one too adheres to many of the common characteristics of prison literature. The difference between the two is the content – the constant reference to and insinuations about prison. Words like “guards”, “glass plate” and “extra visit” show that the narrator is a prisoner. The tone of bitterness brings to life the harshness of prison life that was completely devoid of emotion, no matter what the circumstance. What is interesting about this poem in particular is the fact that it can be considered as a love poem to his wife and yet it clearly manifests the thematic qualities of prison experience and thus is accepted as prison writing.

3.6 CONCLUSION

Putting aside for the moment the dire social implications of widespread imprisonment as it occurred in South Africa between 1920 and 1994, we must acknowledge that one of the most meaningful, vivid and rich bodies of literature to arise in recent years is prison literature. Quentin Miller on his course on “Contemporary American Prison Literature” at the University of Suffolk, said: “Prison literature can plumb the depths of self. It can examine the ills of society. It can accurately depict a hell on earth that is otherwise hidden from the general public. It can descend into madness or soar into poetry.”
CHAPTER FOUR

WRITING IN HOSTILE SPACES

A key text for this study is Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, which was originally written in French in 1974/5 and translated into English in 1977. It is from this work that a deeper understanding of the hostile spaces in which South African prison literature was written can be gained. As the title of his book suggests, Foucault carefully examines the birth of the prison, with particular focus on the modern penal system. His study is vital because of the fact that Foucault’s suggestion that the modern penal system has been established as a means by which to punish. The punishment involves the supervision and organization of bodies in time and space. The space to which Foucault refers is the hostile space in which these authors write. Foucault’s examination of prisons and the prison system will provide the lens through which all the texts to be examined in this study will be viewed.

Brian Milstein suggests that there are many ways that one can read Foucault’s book because it, like prison literature itself, is cross-generic in nature. He notes that “the back cover cross-lists it between ‘philosophy’, ‘history’, and ‘criminology’; in addition to students in these fields, it is widely read by political scientists and sociologists” (2001: 1). Milstein clearly illustrates in the above statement why *Discipline and Punish* is considered cross generic. The use of Foucault’s book in this particular study gives a further indication of its mixed genre status – for here it finds useful application in a literary study. The context in which Foucault was writing was not an unjust political system that turned the majority of the population into criminals and dissidents. He was more concerned about the marginalized minority: homosexuals, the criminally insane, the ‘deviant’ and those who fell foul of society’s norms. The question that must then be asked is, how can such a context relate to this particular study when the
focus is so completely different? Firstly, it must be noted that in the present study Foucault and his book are in no sense the primary focus: rather, his discussion of the prison system is used strategically to provide insights into South African prison literature. He makes a number of important analytical pronouncements in *Discipline and Punish* that I will use as tools to provide insights into the body of South African prison literature. The most important of these pronouncements is his point that the main aim of imprisonment is to punish. However, in order to punish one must have the power to do so, and this power comes in part from knowledge. The punishment experienced in and through imprisonment and the prison system is directed at the prisoner’s body. This ties in with the more contemporary aim of imprisonment: the reformation is now focused on the soul rather than the body, but the focus still lies on a reformation process. The reformation of a prisoner, whether through the body or the soul, takes time – and this is the physical time that the prisoner spends in prison. The imprisonment occurs in a specific space. It is these five elements that will form the lens through which we read South African prison literature and that will provide the basis for the discussion in this chapter. As each of these elements is discussed it will become self-evident how Foucault’s arguments tie in directly with the reading, understanding and studying of prison literature.

At this point we need to stop and ask what may seem to be an asinine question: why were the authors of South African prison literature in prison? Or, to be more precise, what purpose was their imprisonment supposed to serve? The answer to this question is quite simple: to be punished. Foucault believes that we must consider and recognize punishment as “a complex social function and a political tactic” (1977: 23). Foucault’s analysis applies very neatly to the apartheid regime in South Africa. The government in power at the time of the imprisonment of the prison-authors examined in this study ruled that imprisonment was the punishment fit for the crime the authors had been accused of committing. This is true for both political and non-political prison-authors. Foucault makes a remarkable statement about
crime that refers to psychiatric custody but covers imprisonment for political reasons rather well. He says that in modern times, presumably in the twentieth century, crime is no longer to be considered solely an act that breaks the law: “passions, instincts, anomalies, infirmities, maladjustments, effects of environment or heredity . . . come under the judicial lens” (1977: 17). The first in Foucault’s list of reasons for imprisonment is certainly very appropriate to this study: invariably, the political prison-authors – those imprisoned for purely political reasons – went against the system because they were passionate about the cause for which they stood. Foucault also uses the word ‘anomalies’ as part of his explanation. According to The New Oxford Illustrated Dictionary ‘anomalous’ means “irregular, abnormal” (1978: 57). A synonym for anomaly, in one of its senses, is non-conformity. ‘Non-conformity’ certainly characterizes the prisoners classified as having committed crimes against the government and the country; thus, imprisoning these non-conformists was part of a larger political strategy – which ties in very well with Foucault’s argument. These people had to be punished (in the eyes of the government of the day) and this punishment came in the form of imprisonment.

Secondly, Foucault argues that the power to punish is directly tied to knowledge. This knowledge creates and classifies individuals and derives authority from relationships of power and domination. The modern knowledge that Foucault describes is the knowledge that relates to human nature and behaviour, which is measured against a norm. Power and knowledge are constitutive of one another: “the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations” (1977: 28). Knowledge without power is useless. The individuals who have knowledge, in this case, are the prison authorities and courts, and they derive their authority directly from the government of the time. This ‘authority’ is underpinned by political power: therefore knowledge is merely an instrument. Each of these individuals is
given various powers and techniques by which he can punish. Thus, as regards prison literature, the individuals and systems that punish the authors of this literature have the knowledge of what is considered to be the norm, and through their relationship with the law-makers are given the power to punish. The sequence is: power – and only then the deployment of ‘knowledge.’ It is clear, then, that, in the case of prison literature, the individuals and systems that act in concert to imprison a particular individual have a vital role in shaping the experience that in turn gives rise to the writing of the prison literature itself.

Foucault continues his explanation of the power to punish by examining the modern methods of punishment used in prisons. This provides key factors in this study because he suggests that the modern power to punish is based on the supervision and reorganization of bodies in time and space. It is important to Foucault to see how, through time, punishment has changed from the physical punishment of the body to punishment of the soul. I will argue that it is only in prison that this supervision and reorganization of bodies can take place (‘prison’ here is understood to be any physical place of incarceration, whether prison camp, formal prison \textit{per se} or detention centre). There are three important assertions in this statement: the \textit{bodies} that are to be supervised and reorganized; secondly, the \textit{time} that it takes; and lastly the \textit{space} in which they are to be supervised and reorganized.

Foucault believes that, in the eyes of repressive regimes, ‘bodies’ are merely objects to be acted upon. This forms the third element of his pronouncement. He suggests that in early times (which he refers to throughout the book as the ‘Ancien Regime’ – no specific date given) punishment and the power to punish were an economy of excess that he refers to as ‘surplus power.’ Those who were given the power to punish abused their positions by punishing to the extreme. The bodies of the prisoners were abused and tortured. This was not a part of the ‘job description’ of those in power, or the aim of imprisonment itself.
Imprisonment was considered, by the law, as being punishment enough. The physical abuse that took (and still takes) place, was (and still is) a consequence of this economy of excess. I will suggest that this remained true in the case of political prisoners where, on racial grounds and on grounds of conscience, punishment in South African prisons was excessive. We must then conclude that in this regard the South African prison system, in practice, did not progress towards the reformation of the soul as quickly as French prisons did. This will be reflected in the literature that has been produced.

This study will show how one of the pervading themes throughout prison literature is an overwhelming sense of loss and lack of identity. By being allocated a prison number, these authors are aware of being nothing more than ‘bodies’ in the eyes of the regime, those around them, and, most importantly, to themselves. One could mistakenly assume that only the state and its functionaries would hold this view and that the prisoners themselves would not subscribe to it. In taking away their names, personal belongings and all that made them unique individuals, the prisoner too loses a personal sense of uniqueness – and thereby, on some level, subscribes to this view.

Foucault says that public executions are the most horrific way in which the body is acted upon and displayed. Although none of the authors in South African prison literature refer to public executions, most of them are aware of the hangings that take place inside of the prison itself and mention this act upon the body frequently – and, in most cases, in a fair amount of detail. This suggests that Foucault was correct in his understanding of executions as the most horrific act on the human body. More often than not, prisoners become quite obsessed with the executions that take place while they are in prison. This obsession does not hold for those on the ‘outside’; the hangings that take place are hidden from the view of the greater public. It is only through the literature of the prisoners themselves that the reading public becomes aware of the gruesomeness of this reality to which those on the ‘outside’ are never exposed. This is especially true in the novel Cold
Stone Jug, where the author himself, Herman Charles Bosman, was on death row for the first part of his sentence, so it can be expected that he would be extremely conscious of this act that could be inflicted upon his body.

Foucault states that apart from executions, the body is always affected by punishment. In prison, punishment that does not have some corporal dimension is almost unimaginable. Non-corporal punishment, in Foucault’s terms, means punishment that is inflicted on the soul, where the body becomes nothing more than the intermediary. In South Africa, this is precisely what the apartheid regime was aiming at doing – inflicting serious psychic damage by way of punishing the body. Foucault suggests, however, that, for the most part, in a modern prison the body is arranged, regulated, and supervised rather than tortured. He says that the overall aim of the modern prison is to reform the soul rather than punish the body. Physical punishment to the body does not necessarily change the mindset of a criminal. It is this mindset that was a factor in a crime being committed in the first place. The penal system then aimed at reorganizing the behaviour of the criminal in order to prevent another crime being committed while bringing about an awareness of the fact that the initial crime committed was unacceptable. This ultimately becomes the reformation of the soul. If the prison system can reform the soul of a prisoner, then the system will have been successful. (In South Africa under apartheid, this meant breaking the political prisoner’s belief in the justice of his or her actions and therefore in the cause that gave rise to these actions.) Although this might be true in terms of official legislation and what is documented in terms of ‘official’ history, it is not what usually happens in reality. The discussion on the pervasive theme of violence in prison literature in the following chapters clearly shows this.

Foucault suggests that in reforming the soul, as detailed above, the focus on the body as a means by which to punish is being gradually replaced. Modern prison authorities aim at changing the way in which the
prisoner behaves and functions on a cognitive level. By changing the prisoners’ thought processes, the hope is that the way in which prisoners deal with life on the ‘outside’ will become more acceptable in terms of societal norms. Thus the punishment is no longer physical in terms of punishment to the body, but rather the actual act of incarceration is the punishment that is accompanied by a learning of acceptable behaviour patterns. This learning process affects internal processes and thus we can refer to this as being directed at the ‘soul.’

Prison-authors are all aware of a spiritual realm while in prison. This is not necessarily always a conscious awareness of the soul, but rather of the existence of something more than the physical. Prisoners search for something deeper within themselves in an attempt to regain some form of personal identity. This search comes about as a result of their being devalued by the prison system to nothing more than an object. This relationship with the spiritual realm ties in with what Foucault believes. He says that modern processes of discipline essentially heighten the awareness of the soul – human beings become aware that there is something more than the physical body. Prison-authors are more than usually prone, then, to a ‘baring of the soul’ because the harrowing conditions of their prison lives cause them to look for some meaning in their bleak existence. Prison-authors write about their spiritual awareness and the means employed by the prison system to reform their thinking. This is true of all ‘good’ literature, but I would argue that in the case of prison literature, the spiritual awareness is always present in a very intimate way. We will see how reading this literature through a ‘Foucauldian’ lens is a powerful and useful tool and how the study of prison literature ties in closely with some of Foucault’s pronouncements.

We also see that Foucault’s reasoning has led us in a circle. Incarceration brings with it (in the vast majority of cases) a heightened awareness in the prisoner of mortality and of the fragility of the body and mind and this in turn induces (again, in most cases) a contemplative cast of
mind, a desire on the part of the prisoner to understand why he or she is being incarcerated, and a larger questioning of the meaning of human existence.

Foucault states that the reorganization and supervision of the body in prison takes place in a certain time frame. This point is not going to be laboured here as it has already been identified as one of the common characteristics of prison literature. Time spent in prison, time away from those on the ‘outside’, time wasted, are a few of the many facets of time that are written about in detail in South African prison literature. Thus, once again, Foucault’s statement ties in directly with the content of prison literature.

A problem that a study like the present one faces is finding a basis for comparison among works of different periods and genres. The works examined here belong to the genres of the novel, poetry, letters, diaries, and memoirs, and span the period 1949 to the 1990s. They are by men and women, and by people jailed for different offences. And while there are many features that recur across the texts, it is difficult (if not impossible) to identify a cluster of defining characteristics common to all texts. What binds all of these otherwise disparate texts together, however, is that they are all literary responses to incarceration. All of these writers were writing in hostile spaces, and it is the purpose of this study to consider the commonalities and differences in these creative responses to imprisonment.

As mentioned earlier, Foucault said that modern power to punish is based on the supervision and organization of bodies in time and space. We now turn our attention to the space to which Foucault is referring.

The space in which the prisoner finds him or herself, in the literal sense, is the prison. In Chapter Three of *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault expounds on the formation of this space, basing his work on Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon theory:

Bentham’s Panopticon is the architectural figure of this composition. We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole
width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a school boy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather its three functions – to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide – it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of the supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap. (1977: 199)

It was in this very space that Bentham hoped to see prisoners being kept. No matter how visible, the literal space of the prisoner is limited, and this lack of literal space for the prisoner heightens the sense of hostility. However, Bentham’s prison was never put into practice. But his description does offer a very vivid sense of the prison’s ultimate purpose: to incarcerate, and subject to close scrutiny, every prisoner committed to it.

Perhaps the best description of confinement, though, is Bosman’s. In *Cold Stone Jug*, the reader is introduced in detail to the various cells or hostile spaces that can be found in a prison. Bosman starts with a description of his death row cell and later moves on to describe the other cells when he is moved into the central section of the prison. A discussion on Bosman’s hostile space is examined in detail in the next chapter.

Prisoners are aware of their constant visibility, but more especially of the power this visibility gives the prison officials. The prisoner, wanting to disrupt and redress this imbalance of power, would need to find a form of power for him or herself. The prison-authors use their writing as a means by which to lessen the power of the prison and the prison authorities. Bosman, Breytenbach, Lewin, Cronin, Brutus and all other prison-authors are aware of the power of this hostile space and so ‘write it.’ When Roberts suggests that “the impulse behind the measuring and the analyzing must be to gain recognition of the limits of one’s space and thereby have control over it” (1985: 68), she illustrates how through writing (which would be the measuring and analyzing of the hostile space), the prison-author regains some degree of personal control. Through writing about his or her hostile
space, the prisoner succeeds in taking away some of the power put in place by this very hostile space about which he or she writes.

Schalkwyk points out that “to write from and about prison, to write as a prisoner, is therefore in itself an act of dissent . . .” (1998: 81). Thus, by analyzing and writing about this hostile space, prisoners empower themselves. Many prisons forbade the act of writing, except for the regulation once-a-month, five-hundred-word letter. Thus those who wrote in prison, about prison, were in direct contravention of this particular regulation. Their writing must be seen as an act of dissent. Writing in hostile spaces gave the prison-authors some form of power, was a means by which to analyze and measure their personal space in order to gain some control, was an act of dissent and, lastly, was a way in which to find some form of inner sanctum. Through writing, the prisoner then begins to redefine his or her personal life space, accepting what it is, and so finds a modicum of inner peace and a source of inner and very personal power. All prison-authors, whether novelists, poets or diarists, existed in this hostile space. When Foucault states that prisoners are reorganized and supervised in space and time, he provides a valuable point of comparison for this study. An awareness of the space to which he is referring is important for a close reading of any prison literature. This space is the context that one must bear in mind because it is the context in which this literature is being written. It also provides the link that binds together all the literature, despite the many differences. We must conclude that Foucault’s pronouncement about space in prison is invaluable to and for the study of South African prison literature.

Roberts warns, however, that constant reference to prison space could lessen the value and the impact of prison writing: “there are predictable elements in any prison-experience and these do run the risk of becoming hackneyed through repetition in writing. It seems to me that prison literature might be more vulnerable to cliché than other kinds because of the very circumscription of the prison environment. There are . . . expected
references to the smallness of space . . .” (1985: 68). The constant reference to prison space, as referred to by Roberts, is merely one of the common characteristics found in prison literature, as was shown in the previous chapter. But the writing in hostile spaces is a far more in-depth, at times subliminal, part of the life of prison-authors, not just of their writings. It is a state of being, and an awareness.

Foucault states that in life there is a “constant division between the normal and the abnormal, to which every individual is subjected . . . the existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal bring into play [the] disciplinary mechanisms . . . . All the mechanisms of power, which even today are disposed around the abnormal individual, to brand him and to alter him . . .” (1977: 199–200). The fact that a prisoner is considered abnormal in and by society therefore creates a division between society and the prisoner, the normal and the abnormal, society and hostile spaces. The fact that the prisoner is repositioned into a hostile space immediately positions him or her into the abnormal. Figurative as this space might be, each prisoner is very much aware of the hostility.

As a result of this repositioning, prison-authors writing in these figurative hostile spaces at times resort to the accepted stereotypes when writing about fellow prisoners, often resorting to melodrama in order for their writings to ‘live up’ to normal societal expectations. This is true of intelligent path-breaking writers like Bosman and Breytenbach who I believe deliberately stereotype some of their characters in what could be considered a satirical jab at the very reader who stereotypes the criminal in the first place. These stereotypes can firstly be seen in the description of the criminal physiognomy. Schalkwyk suggests that the mode of representation used in some hostile spaces:

pretends to be no more than truthful description, but is in fact a trope which appeals emotively and ideologically to the most threadbare and disreputable of commonplace prejudices: criminal physiognomy. The provenance of the notion that there is a particular criminal type, which reveals itself in certain facial and other bodily feature . . . their representation of themselves to an outside audience [is based] on
stereotyped, unreflective, notions from beyond the prison of a criminal ‘other’, instantly recognizable by its lower forehead, jutting jaw and pig-like eyes. (1998: 82)

The same is true of the melodrama found in prison literature. Melodrama is used in prison writing because the hostile space in which the prison-author is writing necessitates its use. This is a coping mechanism for the prison-author. An excellent example of this can be found at the beginning of Herman Charles Bosman’s Cold Stone Jug where he recalls the first time that he found himself in a holding cell. Schalkwyk states that when Bosman opens the book with “Murder,’ I answered, (1999: 7) this is merely the opening gambit of a game in which Bosman the murderer plays with his audience’s expectations and stereotypes regarding the criminal type” (1998: 89–90). Bosman also resorts, at times, like other prisoners, to creating a hostile space in which the criminal is stereotyped. “They were a pretty villainous-looking lot, the stone-yard span . . . they stood out in point of appearance: their foreheads were lower; their jaws more stubbly and seemed to stick out more; they seemed more unprepossessing and more hulking and more brutalizing . . .” (1999: 71).

All the authors discussed in this study mention a feeling of alienation, especially at the beginning of their time in prison. This alienation from the ‘outside’ never dissipates; it is only made bearable by the fact that most of the prisoners form some type of relationship with fellow inmates and so they find some form of acceptance in this hostile space. Thus writing in hostile spaces can be seen as a means of “justifying oneself to those outside that one never belonged inside at all” (Schalkwyk 1998: 81).

Foucault also shows how the prison system is the mechanism used to create a sense of power for those ‘imprisoning’, to change the prisoner and also to label him or her. By ‘branding’ the prisoner, prisons and the prison system brings into being another hostile space. Not only are the prisoners alienated on the ‘inside’, they are alienated on the ‘outside’ too – something they experience upon their release. Thus the hostile space in which the prisoners are writing or writing about (we should remember that not all prison-authors necessarily wrote about their imprisonment while in prison,
but still had a personal experience of this hostile space) is invisible yet tangible both in and outside of prison. Bosman’s narrator says:

I did not know that, in actual reality, I would never again in my life wear a suit that did not have numbers on it. I did not know, then, how a man who has once been in prison feels the rest of his life when he is outside. For I left prison twenty years ago. And I have been conscious for every moment of the time, since then, that I am an ex-convict. Every suit I wear has got prison numbers plastered on it. If the world can’t see those numbers, I can . . . But the world can see them all right. (1999: 213)

This feeling is experienced by *all* prisoners upon their release, and shows the importance and the impact that the figurative hostile space has on the life of a prisoner. Political prisoners may not have felt as degraded as the common criminal did, but because their prison experience stays with them for life, there will always be a part of them that will remain a prisoner. It is in and about this hostile space that they write and we must read.

Because the prison-author finds him or herself in this hostile space and begins to write about it, he or she is led to include all the issues that have been, in this study, termed common characteristics of prison literature. Through examining the hostile space in detail, one can see the writing in hostile spaces as much more than just a prison novel, poem, letter, or diary. Hostile spaces like those found by the prisoner create an awareness of self, which in turn leads the prison-author to include autobiographical elements in his or her writing. This awareness of self also leads to the search and questioning of ‘prison identity’ found in much of the writing. Hostile spaces bring an awareness of others, death, time, freedom, spirituality and the symbolic meaning of the ordinary, like birds. The list can go on and ultimately what we would be left with is a list of the common characteristics found in prison literature as cited in Chapter Three. Thus writing in hostile spaces has resulted in a body of work that I refer to as South African prison literature, surveyed and examined in detail in this study.
Bosman was born in 1905 and from an early age was absorbed by literature. After completing his tertiary education he was appointed to a teaching post in the Groot Marico district. He returned to Johannesburg during the June holidays to visit his mother – a visit that ended in tragedy when he fired a hunting rifle at his stepbrother on 17 July 1926, killing him instantly. Bosman was sentenced to death but his sentence was commuted to ten years and he ended up serving only four years in jail. *Cold Stone Jug* is an account of his experience in Pretoria Central Prison.

This discussion of the novel begins by providing an overview of the novel’s various parts and characteristics, and then goes on to consider the text’s role as ‘foundational’ to South African prison literature.

The title of the novel introduces the reader to what is commonly known as ‘boob slang.’ This was discussed in Chapter Three as prison diction – language that is specific to prisons and prisoners. ‘Cold stone jug’ is typical prison slang for the prison itself. Bosman therefore introduces the reader from the onset of the novel to the fact that this piece of writing will be about a prison, and will, moreover, use language appropriate to that milieu. Andersen suggests “his title for the work gives some indication that his major focus lies rather more on the *bios* (life) than on the *autos* (self) of his autobiography. This choice doubtless assisted in the maintenance of objectivity, which Bosman was at pains to sustain . . .” (1992a: 15). Thus, just in the reading of the title, the reader is introduced to prison diction, the objective manner in which this account is to be told and the fact that it cannot be classified as a pure autobiography. Gray refers to the novel as “the awkwardly mixed, ferocious fictional confession” (1986: 25).
The novel begins with Bosman in a holding cell with a number of other men, who are discussing the reasons for their incarceration. Throughout the novel, Bosman sets himself up as an outsider, and this starts in his preamble to the novel, with the first word of the novel, “Murder” (1999: 45). The novel then continues for ten chapters, each manifesting many of the unique attributes of Bosman’s writing.

Chapter One begins by introducing the reader to prison life as the author remembered it. The reader must take cognizance of the fact that Bosman wrote the novel several years after his release from prison, and as a result not all of the incidents can be considered completely factual. Bosman was unable to write in prison, because he felt that the environment in which he found himself stifled his creative ability. “. . . the atmosphere inhibited his urge to write, something as necessary to him as dreaming at night” (Blignaut 1981: 43). He writes in the first-person, narrating events of his and the lives of other prisoners and prison staff with whom he came into contact while doing his ‘time.’ This narrative comprises a number of short stories, the writing for which Bosman is most renowned. It is through his short-story writing that Bosman became acclaimed and this natural ability naturally manifests itself continually throughout this novel. Andersen refers to “Bosman’s delight in story-telling . . . there are many instances of his characteristic satire in Cold Stone Jug, and a good number take the form of stories about life in prison . . . . Bosman’s satirical skills are inseparable from the talent for story-telling” (1992b: 38–39). The inclusion of short stories in the main narrative is merely one aspect of Bosman’s unusual narrative technique. “The narrative begins in a deceptively lighthearted tone that later disintegrates under the pressure of the narrator’s descent into insanity” (MacKenzie 2000: 26). The narrator and narrative technique used by Bosman continually changes throughout the novel. He is either narrating a personal anecdote or narrating someone else’s story, in tones that differ, too, as illustrated by the above quotation. Margaret Lenta (1992: 56) makes a further distinction in terms of the narrative found in this novel. She says
that the reader must divide the narrative into Bosman-narrator and Bosman-prisoner. This is a vital distinction to make because the Bosman who was writing this novel in the late 1940s was very different to the Bosman who experienced the trauma of incarceration in the 1920s.

Bosman was haunted by his prison experience for the rest of his life, and he wrote about this experience in an attempt to rid himself of the ghosts that followed him out of prison when he was released. It took him nineteen years to ready himself to face these ghosts in the writing of this novel, and this lapse of time makes his narrative somewhat unreliable as a ‘faithful account’. “In Bosman’s efforts at reliable reportage, he also recognizes the fallibility of memory” (Andersen 1992b: 36). It has also been suggested that Bosman, like many of the other prison-authors, writes not only as a cathartic exercise but also in order to create a vehicle by which the reading public can be informed about prison conditions. Rosenberg claims that in 1948 “Herman’s claustrophobia and nightmares about incarceration in prison gave Helena [his wife] great cause for concern. So she suggested that as a therapeutic catharsis he write an autobiographical novel chronicling his experiences in prison” (1976: 191).

I would also suggest that, in the case of Bosman and other well-known authors, writing about their prison experience could also have been the simple fulfilment of their instinctive and inherent artistic desire to create through the medium of language. Bosman is known for his love for beautiful things. Andersen states that Bosman saw life as being inferior to art: “thus it seems natural that Bosman should wish to make his life – the life of a poet – a work of art” (1994: 28). The ‘ugliest’ experience of Bosman’s life must have been his time in prison. If what Andersen says is true, then he would have wanted to find a way to change this experience into something beautiful, into art. The only means by which he could do this was to write about it. For Bosman, language was the way that he could create a masterpiece. After successfully ridding himself of most of his ‘prison ghosts’ through the writing and publishing of Cold Stone Jug,
Bosman moved into a time in his career of prolific writing, which continued until his death in 1951.

Each chapter of *Cold Stone Jug* offers the reader a new insight into prison life at Pretoria Central Prison, although Bosman does not refer to the prison by this name. Instead he renames the prison Swartklei Great Prison that shows that some of the fictionalization in the novel is purposely done. Gray suggests that the reason for this is that “in writing his record he was not so much intent on providing the reader with a documentary as with a more general narrative about the convict experience. By naming the institution ‘Swartklei Great Prison’, he alerts us to his partly allegorical intention” (1999:12). Special note must be taken of Chapter One, where he introduces us to a fellow prisoner ‘Stoffels’, of whom there is no existing record at Pretoria Central Prison. Andersen states that although she is “aware that it is not unusual for an autobiographer deliberately to incorporate fictional elements, . . . [Bosman’s] are not in the same category as . . . poetic self-invention . . .” (1992b: 37). However, Bosman does try to be dispassionate in his account and this is clear in the unembittered tone that he maintains throughout most of the novel. Andersen sums up the tone of this novel when she quotes Sachs (1971: 33) recalling an incident that took place when Bosman left the court room after being sentenced for the murder: “as Herman put his right foot on the first step of the Black Maria, he turned half around and winked at a good-looking girl who was among the spectators. She threw up her hands and . . . made a dash for the street, to the great amusement of the onlookers.” “Plainly, the mirth was shared by the distraught young man himself. It was in this spirit that *Cold Stone Jug* was written” (1992b: 43). This novel is not written in any strict chronological order and thus it starts some time into his sentence where he is attending a Mother’s Day service.

Chapter Two is vital to understanding the changes that took place in Bosman’s circumstances in prison, because it is in this chapter that Bosman recalls how he is told that his prison sentence has been commuted from
death to ten years. He would thus be moved from the condemned cells to the normal cells where he would come into direct contact with other prisoners, and where the treatment of the prisoners is completely different. He describes these cells as “steel cages, partitioned from each other by bolted steel plates . . . one row had steel plates in front as well; the other row had bars and wire mesh” (1999:63). This directly correlates with what Foucault says about prisoners being punished in a particular space. As has already been mentioned, it is this space that becomes the hostile space in which and about which the prison authors write. Therefore the mention of the different cells in this novel provides for the reader an idea of the physical space in which Bosman spent his time. The physical space is not limited to the actual prison cells. In Chapter Nine Bosman writes about the time he spent in an observation cell: “the luxury of a mattress, after all those years in which I had slept on a hard floor, was so thrilling that I felt I wanted to cry” (1999: 177). This remark shows how the physical space in which the bodies of the prisoners are organized and supervised can be punitive, too. For Bosman, the effect of being locked up in such confined spaces haunted him for the rest of his life. After leaving prison, he suffered from terrible claustrophobia, which is best illustrated by Valerie Rosenberg, when she tells of a time when, trapped in a lift, Bosman tried “in sheer animal terror . . . to rip the lift to pieces” (1976: 191).

The figurative space is what happens in the minds of the prisoners both in and out of prison. They are writing in this hostile space, too. Lenta suggests that once a prisoner is separated from life on the outside, he or she becomes a part of what she refers to as the “underworld.” This is her term for the space in which the prisoners exist – and is another way of describing the hostile space that is referred to in this study. She too recognizes that these hostile spaces often prompt prisoners to transcend them through art: “The evidence that the descent into the underworld has empowered the artist is of course the book itself” (Lenta 1992: 64).
The second section of Chapter Three is vital to understanding Bosman’s time in prison, as he uses this entire section to describe a typical day in prison. Chapter Four introduces the reader to the various employment opportunities in prison. Bosman was placed in the printer’s shop and was then demoted to the stone pile. In this chapter he introduces Pym, the inmate who displays an increasingly unwelcome sexual interest in Bosman.

Chapter Five tells the stories of Billy the Bastard, Slangvel, Tex Fraser, Jimmy Gair and Donald Hughes, and contains many of the dislocated ‘short stories’ that I mentioned earlier. Even when he was in the throes of recalling a desperate time in his life, then, Bosman was inexorably drawn to the power of narrative – the way people construct stories about their lives. And, of course, these prisoners’ stories had a weird, disembodied quality to them that clearly appealed to Bosman’s sense of the bizarre and absurd.

Chapter Six deals mostly with his time in the stone yard and is interspersed with his various interactions with other inmates. Foucault suggests, as is shown in the previous chapter, that the modern power to punish is based on the supervision and organization of bodies in time and space. In his account, Bosman tells of the routine in prison. Just as the routine is constant and continual, so are his references to it. The routine found in prisons is the way in which the system attempts to supervise and organize the bodies of prisoners in an attempt to both punish and reform them. “The infrequent variation in prison routine . . . [is] soul-destroying and mind-injuring . . .” (Andersen 1992a: 17). The fact that routine affected the prisoners both physically and emotionally shows that part of the power to punish was, to a certain extent, successful. By touching the prisoners on an emotional level, through the organization and supervision of their bodies, which were considered to be nothing more than objects, the prison system was punishing them. Andersen substantiates this notion when she says that “accommodation and routine are clearly designed to deter the inmates from returning to prison after the completion of their sentences” (1992a: 17).
Chapter Seven introduces another part of the routine in prison, that of meal times. Prison food is notorious for being of a poor quality and the food that Bosman had to eat is no exception. In this chapter a food strike takes place. In Chapter Eight, Bosman leaves the stone yard to work in the carpenter’s shop. He was proud of this promotion because working in the stone yard came with a stigma, one that he was able to rid himself of in his new job. He returns to Pym and his obsessive behaviour. This chapter also touches on writing and studying in prison, and ends with an event that deeply touched Bosman’s life. He was assigned the task of fitting a bracket to a guard post, and this meant that he would have to work on the ‘outside.’ In relating this incident in such vivid detail, Bosman emphasizes how traumatic it is to be imprisoned. The opportunity to experience the ‘real’ world by seeing other people outside of the prison walls, while completing the said task, gave Bosman a renewed sense of hope. In Chapter Nine he discusses the possibility of receiving a special discharge – thereby reducing the actual time that he would have to spend in prison. Another important event takes place in this chapter – his experience of insanity. This was possibly Bosman’s greatest fear, so when he finds himself in the observation cell he explains his emotions and experiences in explicit detail. He ends this chapter by recalling how Pym was moved to an asylum for the criminally insane.

The actual time spent in prison is also part of the punitive measures put into place by the prison system. This too must be regarded as an effective means of punishment in the case of Bosman. In Chapter Ten, the final chapter of the novel, he spends a great deal of time writing about the time wasted in prison and the time he had left to serve. He works out to the day when he is due to be released. The effect of the time spent in prison is illustrated clearly when, on the day he is to be released, no one comes to call him. He shows complete terror when he is told that no official confirmation has been received and one of the warders suggests that he may “never get out” (1999: 194). The total devastation and desolation that
Bosman experienced when realizing that he may have to ‘do’ more time is 
terrifying.

As is suggested by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, criminals are 
imprisoned as a form of punishment. Bosman shows on numerous occasions 
how the punitive measures are put into action in the prison system. Gray 
says, “Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug* is really a critique of unthinking notions 
about the value of imprisonment” (1999: 17). Bosman’s time in prison 
occurred when the punishment inflicted was still aimed at the body. A 
prisoner imprisoned in South Africa between 1926 and 1930 would have 
experienced bodily maltreatment rather than an attempt to reform the soul. 
At this stage in history, the death penalty was still in place and this would 
be the ultimate punishment to this object – the body. Bosman flatly 
remarks: “Swartklei Great Prison is dominated by the gallows chamber” 
(1999: 51).

*Cold Stone Jug* did well upon release, but after that took some time 
before achieving the status it enjoys today. Gray says that it “may at last be 
seen as having come into its own” (1999: 34). This novel has definitely 
come into its own, so much so that its writing has elevated Bosman to the 
rank of ‘father of South African prison literature.’ A comparative analysis 
of this and other prison writings will also show that *Cold Stone Jug* 
provided a core set of characteristics common to almost all prison literature.

Indeed, one of the main arguments of this study is that Bosman 
‘founded’ prison literature in the writing of *Cold Stone Jug*, as many of the 
characteristics of this seminal text recur in the work of other prison writers. 
First, though, we must review its characteristics and consider their centrality 
to the literary category ‘prison literature.’ According to the two necessary 
criteria as set out in the previous chapter, *Cold Stone Jug* is considered to be 
an example of prison literature because it is about a personal prison 
experience written by the prisoner himself. Furthermore, a close study of 
the novel yields a set of criteria (as discussed in the previous chapter) that 
can be used to establish areas of commonality in prison literature in general.
It is also interesting to observe that *Cold Stone Jug* cannot readily be classified into any other existing genre – whether novel, autobiography or memoir. It certainly contains elements of these genres, but does not fit neatly into any one of these categories. Lenta suggests this when she states that “the work has characteristics that relate it to several literary genres, and refuses to site itself safely in a single one” (1992: 56). Henrietta Mondry says something similar: “commentators on *Cold Stone Jug* are unanimous that it is difficult to define the genre of this book … Bosman himself did not help to clarify the issue of genre: while calling the book ‘a chronicle’ on its title page, he contradicted this subtitle in the epilogue, where the book is termed ‘a love story’…” (1992: 87).

It must also be noted that, as prevalent as these common features may be, there are unique areas to be found in each individual’s work that must be noted, and Bosman is no exception in this regard. As already mentioned, these unique areas account for the differences found in this comparative analysis. The differences found in the prison literature of Bosman will be introduced in this chapter as unique areas of his writing. Only after examining the works of other authors can these areas be cast into the form of ‘differences’ that can be found in South African prison literature. This not only suggests individualism in the respective works, but also a development taking place in the literature. This development becomes noticeable as more prison literature is published. As this study progresses it will show how, in parallel with broader developments in South African society itself, prison literature changes from being an ‘apolitical’ body of writing to one that is intensely political. It will be argued that these developments in South African prison literature can be linked directly to the changes in the government in power at the times in which the prison-authors were serving their time.

The characteristics that are common to South African prison literature were set out in Chapter Three. The aim of this chapter is to take those criteria and show, through an in-depth study of *Cold Stone Jug*, how each of
them is manifested in this novel. These commonalities, then, are to be found in some form in all subsequent prison literature. It can therefore be argued that *Cold Stone Jug* must be considered the ‘foundational text’ and Herman Charles Bosman indisputably ‘the father’ of South African prison literature.

A question that needs to be answered is where Bosman himself got his inspiration from in the writing of his prison experience and whether there is a framework that he used to develop *Cold Stone Jug*. Bosman is known to have admired the literature of Oscar Wilde, who was released from prison thirty years prior to Bosman’s own imprisonment, who in turn admired the writing of Edgar Allan Poe. M. C. Andersen believes that Bosman and Wilde both “manipulate[d] their material for artistic effect” (1994: 32). Thus it is possible that the style in which Bosman chose to write about his prison experience mimics that of Wilde. Stephen Gray spends a great deal of time answering the question “what works did Bosman read to sharpen his concept of the ‘prison memoir’?” (1999: 28). He suggests that Bosman read Alexander Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844–1845), Silvio Pellico’s *Ten Years in Prison* (1831) and the work of Jim Phelan (*Jail Journey*, 1941), in particular.

In his introduction to the Anniversary Edition of *Cold Stone Jug*, Stephen Gray (1999) mentions that this novel is usually considered the foundational text of prison literature in South Africa. This could be due to the fact that it was one of the first prison novels to be published and recognized as such. Clearly, purely in terms of chronology, all prison writing that followed has to be compared and criticized using *Cold Stone Jug* as a guide. As seen in Chapter One of this study, the history of imprisonment in South Africa spans many centuries, but, for obvious reasons, extant accounts are predominantly those that were written down. It is reasonable to assume that many accounts were oral in nature, and would have suffered the fate of this fugitive genre – extinction over time. Stories could have been passed on about Autshumato and Makhanda’s time on Robben Island, but nothing can be found in written form. Another example
is the accounts Boer soldiers wrote about their imprisonment in Ceylon and St. Helena. However, despite all of this, the first prison novel to have been published is Herman Charles Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug*. Sheila Roberts confirms this: “As far as I know, the first extended work to come out of actual imprisonment (and not an imagined one as in a part of *Cry, the Beloved Country*) is H. C. Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug* . . .” (Roberts 1985: 62). Craig MacKenzie further substantiates this when he remarks: “In an important sense, the significance of *Cold Stone Jug* is that it is an early contribution to the corpus of ‘prison literature’ ” (MacKenzie 2000: 27).

Precisely why, though, should Bosman be considered the ‘father’ of prison literature? The phenomenon could be a consequence of the ‘copy-cat’ syndrome, conscious or subconscious. Writers read the works of other writers. As we shall see, some of the authors considered in this study read *Cold Stone Jug* before their own imprisonment. It is can readily be understood that, after reading such a compelling account of prison life, these prison-authors (as they were to become) already had a pattern in mind before writing their own accounts. A cycle had begun. Authors who were political prisoners would write and would be read by other future prisoners, who in turn would write. The snowball effect of reading and writing could offer a plausible explanation as to why Bosman holds a place of such high esteem within this collection of writing. Other explanations could include chronology: he was, quite simply, the first to be published. We could also consider the fact that he happened to be a favourite author of someone like Breytenbach, who was later arrested and imprisoned. Bundy, in the introduction to Govan Mbeki’s *Learning from Robben Island*, suggests that “Bosman’s sardonic *Cold Stone Jug* begins the genre of the body of South African prison writing” (1991: xxiv). Bosman’s pervasive influence is strikingly attested to by these comments.

Surely the principal reason for Bosman’s influence, though, is the sheer quality of *Cold Stone Jug*. In no way can the work be considered a mundane and systematic recollection of Bosman’s time in jail, which has prompted
more creative responses to prison experiences by the prison-authors who followed. The comparative analysis of South African prison literature undertaken in this thesis will show that this is a very seminal novel: many common characteristics found in other prison writings are present also in *Cold Stone Jug*. However, the thesis will also show through comparative analysis the many marked differences between *Cold Stone Jug* and other prison literature. It will be shown how this novel is exemplary in its own right through the distinctive qualities of Bosman’s writing. Some of these qualities have already been outlined in the introduction to the novel in the section above. There are, however, other notable areas that must be mentioned because they will provide the foundation for the differences found in the various texts analyzed in this study, when compared with *Cold Stone Jug*.

**UNIQUE FEATURES PARTICULAR TO COLD STONE JUG**

A close study of South African prison literature in terms of the framework set out below quickly becomes tedious. There are an overwhelming number of similarities between Bosman’s text and those that follow, and thus a mechanical demonstration of these correspondences is unnecessary. What will be attempted instead is a comparative analysis that touches on areas of similarity but also, and more importantly, examines in more detail the unique way in which each prison-author expresses his or her prison experience. Each author brings something new and previously unexplored by those writing before and therefore we must highlight the significant differences found in this literature.

This is especially true of *Cold Stone Jug*: there are elements in this novel that are comparable to no other. This section does not offer a comparative analysis of *Cold Stone Jug* and the other texts found in this study, but rather highlights the areas unique to Bosman that will then be carried through the rest of the thesis as a means of comparison. This section,
in other words, provides the basis upon which the rest of this comparative analysis will be based. Here we examine what will provide us with a foundation for the remarkable differences found in prison literature in terms of style, tone, narrative and content, to name a few, to be found in all genres of prison literature.

One of the most unusual features of this novel is Bosman’s ingenious interweaving of prison stories of other prisoners with his own prison experience. MacKenzie suggests that these prison stories “constitute an entire subgenre in Cold Stone Jug” (2000: 27). Many prison-authors write about their fellow inmates, but Bosman includes entire stories. Andersen says, “Bosman’s satirical skills are inseparable from the talent for storytelling” (1992b: 39). Bosman was a recognized short-story writer before he wrote about his prison experience and his eye for the pithy, short narrative finds its way into his novel in the way in which he recalls the other prisoners. “I was moved by Bluecoat Tex Fraser’s story, hearing it from his own lips, there in the stone-yard, seated beside him with a pile of stones in front of us” (1999: 113).

As the above quotation indicates, Bosman wrote in the first person. First-person narration is characteristic of most prison writing and is the most appropriate narrative mode given prison literature’s strongly autobiographical impulse. What makes Cold Stone Jug unique, though, is the fact that Bosman uses the second and third person too. When referring to daily prison routine Bosman moves to the second person, “you are awakened about 5:30 a.m.” (1999: 78). This detachment from prison life is intensified through his use of the third person. In doing this Bosman excludes himself from prison life almost as if it were surreal. He emotionally detaches himself from this way of life either because he could not deal with the reality or as a coping mechanism.

Bosman is cautious not to reveal personal emotion. In his review of the novel Charles Eglington states that “in his attempt to describe as coolly as possible an experience that was obviously painful and bitterly humiliating,
the author has allowed himself to fall into a curiously casual way of writing” (Eglington in Gray 1986: 70). This makes Bosman unique, as what is often clearly manifested in the writings of prisoners is their feelings – whether about their crime, their imprisonment, their treatment in prison or the political state of the country. In his prison novel, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, for instance, Breyten Breytenbach shows how bitter he was about being imprisoned and how he loathed the prison authorities and their unfair treatment of both him and the other prisoners. And in Hugh Lewin’s *Bandiet* we are given an exceptionally moving account of his time in prison and the tragedy of the lives lost because of the prison system.

The lack of emotion in *Cold Stone Jug* and the bitterness found in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* show not only differences in prison literature, but also a development in the writing too. The first prison novel was cold and almost devoid of personal emotion and the most contemporary prison accounts have developed into emotional accounts written straight from the heart. This is a direct result of the conditions in which the more contemporary prisoners found themselves. They, unlike Bosman, were imprisoned for political reasons and thus emotion played a role in the acts for which they were imprisoned and would then be manifested in their writings. Here we have a clear example of how a development in prison literature comes as a direct result of the increasing politicization seen in South Africa in the period under examination.

Bosman’s writing is so different because “he handled the raw material of his own life with caution” (Dickson 1975: 174). This could possibly be a deliberate attempt by Bosman to move the focus of the experience from self to the prison. This would then show the importance of the hostile space, the prison itself. In prison there is no longer a ‘self’ and Bosman highlights this fact by not mentioning personal emotions and, at the same time, exposing the destruction that prison life caused to his own personality and identity.

Another unique quality of this novel is how Bosman associates himself with other prison-authors from other countries and previous centuries. This
can especially be seen in the Epilogue where he relates himself and his writing to Villon, Verlaine, Wilde, O. Henry and St. Paul. He says that he “feel[s] a queer sort of spiritual intimacy with other men who have been in prison” (1999: 198). Bosman believed that as a survivor of prison he had become an artist and therefore could relate to those just mentioned.

Another facet of this novel that makes it unique is that fact that Bosman never denies guilt for the crime that he has committed. Political prisoners always believe that they are being unjustly punished whereas Bosman considers himself to be no less a criminal than those in prison with him.

We can conclude that although Cold Stone Jug offers many criteria that go on to become common to prison literature as a whole, Bosman, at the same time, still creates a unique portrait of his time in prison.

We now turn our attention to the common characteristics of prison literature as found in Cold Stone Jug. This is a focused and very specific reading of the novel.

THE FOUNDATIONAL FRAMEWORK AS SET IN COLD STONE JUG.

1. The Autobiography

Cold Stone Jug is only about a small portion of Bosman’s life, and so it cannot be considered an ‘autobiography’ in the accepted sense. MacKenzie refers to it as “Bosman’s semi-autobiographical chronicle of the four years he spent in Pretoria Central Prison…” (2000: 26). There are, however, elements of the genre of autobiography to be found in this novel. As mentioned in Chapter Three, an autobiography can be defined as being a factual account of the author’s own life. It cannot be argued that this novel is an account of Bosman’s life with a focus on his time spent in prison simply because it is not completely factual. In a survey of fiction in English, Edgar Bernstein described Cold Stone Jug as an “autobiographical novel”
(Gray 1999: 34) and Folli claims that “Cold Stone Jug is autobiographical in essence” (1994: 31). In itself, a phrase like ‘autobiographical novel’ clearly indicates that Cold Stone Jug cannot possibly be classified as being purely autobiographical: the generic description ‘novel’ negates the notion of the work’s purely non-fictional status. The same is true in saying that the work is autobiographical ‘in essence’, as this suggests that that there is far more to this novel than the autobiographical element. What has been shown, however, is that, in writing about his prison experience Bosman has to some degree created a sense of autobiography in his writing. He concentrates on the experience of the ‘autos’, the self, and in so doing began a tradition that has been continued in all South African prison literature since.

Let us turn our attention to the novel itself in order to substantiate the assertions that there are in fact traces of autobiography to be found in the content thereof. In Chapter One he vividly recalls the hangings that took place while he was in prison. We know that Bosman spent time on death row, and so this aspect of the work is clearly autobiographical. He in fact says that he “dislike[s] according so much time to the detail of hangings…” (1999: 52). Moreover, throughout the novel he includes what are clearly autobiographical anecdotes. One such detail is found in Chapter Eight where Bosman was instructed to fit a bracket outside of the prison. He explains the joy he felt when spending time on the ‘outside’ and says that “only the other day I passed that same spot again … with the bracket still in place…” (1999: 164). Details like these clearly provide evidence of factual accounts, thereby giving a sense of an autobiographical dimension to Cold Stone Jug. M. C. Andersen says in reference to the novel that “the work is patently autobiographical … not only are its major events verifiably rooted in fact but Bosman constantly reiterates an intention to be honest and accurate as far as possible…” (1992 (2): 36).
2. Sociological Elements

The chapters in *Cold Stone Jug* consist of a number of sketches of Bosman’s time in prison. The reader is introduced to the day-to-day routine of prison life and the language used by fellow inmates. Folli refers to the ordering of Bosman’s novel as being “fragmented” (1994: 38) but suggests that “the fragmented style of the text embodies the absurd nature of prison life as well as the shattered life of the inmates, who inevitably become dehumanized…” (1994: 38). The fact that Bosman writes about prison life in such detail allows for the claim that sociological elements can be found in prison writing. This is true of most prison literature because the prison-authors write their experience from the time of arrest to their release. The human experience of their writings is what brings the prison literature to life for the reader.

Throughout *Cold Stone Jug*, Bosman constantly recalls daily routines and events that occurred while he is in prison. One section of the novel that focuses on this particular aspect of prison writing is the second section of Chapter Three. Bosman starts this section by saying “a typical day in the Great Prison – what is it like?” (1999: 78). He then goes on to explain the daily routine. He starts when the prisoners are woken up at 5:30, how they ready themselves for inspection, have breakfast and then go out to work. He describes the food, the various jobs and the prisoners’ yard in detail. He continues this account by recalling each event as it occurs in the day: lunch, work, supper and the frequent searches which take place.

3. Interplay between fiction and non-fiction

As mentioned by Stephen Gray in the introduction to his edition of this novel, upon investigation no records could be found of the inmates featured in Bosman’s novel. This clearly shows a play between fiction and non-
fiction in the novel. Bosman cleverly interweaves his prison experience and struggle for survival there with fictional characters.

Fictionalization in writing a factual account may not always be deliberate. Andersen suggests that, to a degree, the fictionalization that occurs in any autobiographical work may simply be due to a lapse of memory. Bosman recognizes the fallibility of his memory in writing *Cold Stone Jug* especially since he only began to write it almost twenty years after his release. “Among the many impediments to autobiographical truth are the unreliability of memory, as Bosman recognized” (Andersen 1992b: 36). As a result of this fact, Andersen argues that fiction and autobiography are necessarily inseparable. She refers to this as “accidental fiction” (1992b: 37) because in some cases the use of fiction is not deliberate. A fact that may have slipped the memory of the prison-author or is slightly embellished is not necessarily planned into the writing by the author.

However many lapses in memory occurred in the writing of *Cold Stone Jug*, there is also evidence of deliberate fictionalization on the part of Bosman. This fictionalization begins with the prison in which the novel is set. Bosman was in Pretoria Central Prison, but renames it Swartklei Great Prison in the novel. This continues in some of the characters he introduces and their stories that he recalls. He tells the story of a young inmate by the name of Donald Hughes who recalls for Bosman what it feels like each time he has been discharged. Hughes says that on one occasion he walked out of prison and “took a tram into the middle of Swartklei” (1999: 119), which of course he could not literally do. Statements such as this are examples of the deliberate use of fiction resulting in the interplay between fiction and non-fiction found in prison literature.

Fictionalization can also be seen in the use of exaggeration. This is used as a means of emphasis as well as a way in which to create humour in the novel. (Laughter is another common feature that will be discussed later.) One situation in which exaggeration is used is in Chapter Eight, where
Bosman discusses the correspondence courses that were offered when he was in his third year in prison:

“Well, I done finished my second paper for Doctor of Divinity. Posted it Sunday night.”

“Doctor of what?” his pal would enquire. “What’s it, anyway?”

“I dunno, neither,” the student would reply, “But that’s the one I drawed a line under with my pencil on the list what the schoolmaster showed me.” (1999: 155–156)

The above is an example of the discussions held between two unnamed convicts in relation to their studies in prison. The absurdity of the prisoner in question taking up studies at such a high level, and in such an inappropriate field, is clearly what Bosman wants to draw attention to. It is likely that he exaggerated this example in order to make the point.

Andersen remarks that “Bosman is a raconteur, and Cold Stone Jug is an ideal vehicle for his skills” (1992b: 39). However true this claim might be, I believe that it is an over-simplification in explaining the use of fiction in prison literature. I am not suggesting that it was Andersen’s intention to do so. I believe that she is suggesting that there was a great deal of Oom Schalk in Bosman – even when he was in prison. Oom Schalk, like all good storytellers, does not always differentiate between true and false. Before embarking on writing Cold Stone Jug Bosman had used Oom Schalk as a narrator in many of his short stories and thus a certain ‘carry-over’ of a yarn-spinning style into Cold Stone Jug could be expected. This could explain the interplay between fiction and non-fiction in Cold Stone Jug. But, as already mentioned, this interplay becomes one of the common characteristics found in prison literature. Therefore Bosman’s personal style and traditions within his own writing cannot be the only reason for this feature. There are also a host of psychological reasons for subverting the truth when recalling such a horrific experience. The fictionalizing of prison accounts might have something to do with shame (and this was certainly true of Bosman), and also the desire not to be prosecuted by the authorities. The fact remains, however, that Bosman blends fiction and non-fiction in
his prison account, a feature of prison writing that has become common among many prison-authors.

4. Historical value

By insisting on hiding what was happening in the prisons, government officials have lost a great deal of history for South Africa. History is never objective, of course: any history will be written from the viewpoint or political standing of the author. The government also often tries to determine what can or cannot be recorded. This was especially true during the time of apartheid. Many governmental records were destroyed. In terms of what was happening in the prisons during this time, authorities often turned a blind eye to the poor conditions and harsh treatment of the inmates. Thus prison literature becomes vital because of the valuable insights and historical data that it provides and that would otherwise never have been known. In The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist, Breyten Breytenbach shows how the writing of prison literature is so important in terms of telling the truth. Breytenbach’s work was fiercely censored before it was published, showing how the previous government would not allow certain names and incidents to be released into the public domain. It is mentioned in the novel to ‘Mr. Investigator’ that when these confessions are released, “you will have smoothly-combed Prison spokesmen denying en bloc the veracity of what I am telling you” (1984: 246). Wole Soyinka writes the following in the preface to The Man Died (1972): “books and all forms of writing have always been objects of terror to those who seek to suppress truth” (Lovesey 1995: 31). Breytenbach talks about the routine prison visits that government officials were forced to make in order to ensure the smooth running of the South African prisons. We read in many prison accounts how official prison visits were kept to a minimum and, when they did take place, the prison was ‘show-piecéd’ for the occasion. “All the visits have the same purpose … to put up a façade by which the
Prisons Department may cover the ugly face of everyday reality… making it possible for him [the Important Man] to stand up in parliament or wherever and claim that South African prisons are beautiful, clean, humanely run institutions of rehabilitation” (1984: 177).

No work can claim absolute objectivity, but, in terms of the facts mentioned, these novels must include some previously unwritten truths. Prison literature thus plays the valuable role of filling in the gaps – providing an alternative to the censored, ‘official’ records. Gray remarks that “Bosman’s Cold Stone Jug is really a critique of unthinking notions about the value of imprisonment” (1999: 17). The content of this novel includes historical and philosophical facts, adding to the value of the ‘prison story’ to which few had access. One such example is the way in which prisoners who commit the same offence a number of times are treated. The narrator in Cold Stone Jug says: “as the law used to be (and still is, I believe), after a man has committed the same offence a number of times – twice, I think, in some cases, and about twenty-seven times in others – the judge in passing sentence warns the culprit that if he again appears before the court of law and is convicted he will be declared an habitual criminal” (1999: 48). The law to which Bosman is referring would be documented but the fact that it was used so inconsistently would not be part of any existing historical document. No government would document the fact that, in the eyes of the law, a habitual criminal can be declared so on the whim of a judge rather than according to the actual law itself. Therefore, the fact that prison literature such as Cold Stone Jug documents such a vital fact adds value to the historical content of the novel. Other historical facts that can be found in Cold Stone Jug include a reduction in prison sentences as a result of the passing of the Flag Bill and the visit of the Prince of Wales (1999: 187), as well as the writing of petitions in order to get a special discharge from the Minister of Justice (1999: 188).
5. First-person narration

… I sometimes think, for a few fleeting moments, of the bluecoats in the Swartklei Great Prison. I think of the long prison years in front of them and behind them. I see them hemmed in by brown walls and brown years. I think of these men leading their silent lives. And I hope that God will go with them, through all those years. (1999: 50)

Bosman uses a ‘nameless’ narrator to tell his story and for the most part it is told in the first person. This narrative strategy suggests that the story is a personal experience recalled by the author himself. The use of a first-person narrator, however, is often a very complex literary device. Earlier in this chapter it was argued that Bosman’s narrative strategy is one of the unique features of Cold Stone Jug. This difference will be highlighted when the novel is compared to other prison texts. Therefore the complexities of the first-person narration are not being ignored in this subsection but will be examined in detail in relation to each individual author. The purpose of this subsection is to show how in a comparative analysis, this feature of writing is found to be common, while acknowledging the marked differences manifest in the way each author uses this form of narration. The use of this narration also keeps Bosman involved in the story, making it more detailed, vivid and believable for the reader. This can be seen in Bosman’s account of how he thought he was going mad:

And during this time I found out what insanity was. I found it out through my own symptoms. I realized that insanity had nothing to do with the brain. The ancient Greeks were right. The seat of insanity was the stomach. When I got those mad feelings coming over me, at night, when I was locked up in my cage, and I could see those grotesque figures etched in black against the blackness of the steel walls, then I knew that my insanity wasn’t coming out of my brain at all. Because my brain was working reasonably and logically, and I could think clearly. But that purple lunacy that was like a handful of some slippery substance was coming out of my stomach. That was where I was going mad: not in my head but in my stomach. (1999: 172)

6. The Act of Writing

Imprisonment changes a person forever. The prison system in earlier years was designed to break rather than rehabilitate and more often than not left permanent emotional and psychological scars on those who were
subjected to the system. Václav Havel said that prison is intended “to mark a man for life ... score his heart in such a way that it will never heal completely” (Bould 1991: 8). This particular quotation suggests that the hostile space for the prisoner is not only the space he or she occupies when physically in prison, but is also the space in which the prisoner lives even after his or her release. Breytenbach in *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* states that “prisons only serve to create prisoners” (1984: 345).

One of the questions that this study attempts to answer is why these authors wrote while in prison. The most obvious answer – and one that is true for most of these writers – is that, in writing about their experience in prison, they were attempting to rid themselves of the ‘ghosts’ that their prison experience left behind. These ‘ghosts’ were created as a result of the hostile space in which the prisoner was forced to exist. Such writing, then, can almost be considered an act of cleansing. Some wrote for political reasons, others to expose the atrocities of the prison system, while yet others wrote prison accounts as part of their life-story. Whatever the reasons for writing – and each author had a number of them – one cannot deny the need of these prisoners to ‘talk’ about what they had experienced.

Bosman was haunted by his prison experience throughout his life: in *Cold Stone Jug* he states that he “still gets nightmares about that period” (1999: 216). If the writing of *Cold Stone Jug* was an attempt by Bosman to rid himself of or to deal with the horrors of his prison experience, the fact that he only wrote it nineteen years after his release highlights how difficult it was for him to deal with his imprisonment. Unlike Breytenbach, who was obsessed with the urge to tell immediately of his prison experience, whether in written or oral form, it seems as if Bosman took quite some time to ready himself to share his experience. Folli states that “for Bosman . . . the cathartic need to exorcise prison ghosts was not the only motive for writing *Cold Stone Jug*” (1994: 30). Neil Rusch in *A History of the South African Prison Crusade* maintains that one of Bosman’s aims was “to bring to public notice prison conditions, the enforcement of prison regulations and
the effect these have on the prisoner as human being” (1979: 15). This particular reason for writing becomes prevalent in the writing of political prisoners who wanted to tell the world about the atrocities of imprisonment. It is important to note that, even though Bosman was not a political prisoner, he shares this motivation with political prisoners. As this study has already shown, prison conditions were and still are abominable, thus providing a huge motivating factor for prisoners to share their experiences in and of these conditions. Prison-authors used writing as a vehicle by which to transport stories of these atrocities to those on the ‘outside.’ The hostile space in which all prisoners find themselves is reason enough for them to write – setting aside for the moment the issue of why they find themselves in that hostile space in the first place. This comparative analysis of prison literature will show that there are and must be differences in the writing of those imprisoned for political reasons as opposed to ‘common’ criminals like Bosman, who was imprisoned for murder. The respective reasons for their imprisonment are clearly different, but what is remarkable is that despite this difference, one of their shared motivations for writing this literature provides an even stronger area of commonality. In recounting the daily routine of walking past the mortuary gate on the way to work, Bosman tells how he always used to make the sign of the cross over his breast and forehead – which gave him a great deal of comfort. “I would recommend any convict now in the Swartklei Prison who happens to read this to do the same thing. You can’t go wrong with it” (1999: 81). This piece of advice given to possible prison-readers shows that, in writing, Bosman is hoping to help others where he himself was not helped.

As seen in Chapter One, the living conditions in prison were worse than abominable, and because the prisoners lost their ‘voice’ while in prison, the innate human need to make people aware of the conditions, and possibly bring about change, could only be voiced in the form of a novel, poem or autobiography. Prison regulations forbid the writing about or photographing of prisons and so the outside world was not aware of what
was going on ‘inside.’ “The axis of narrative power is relocated as a prisoner recreates, restores and makes visible a sense of self and world, as official prison accounts are eclipsed, turned against apartheid, and used to construct an oppositional ‘power of writing.’ Prison writing becomes a means of self-empowerment” (Gready 1993: 493).

Apart from the need to share with the outside world what was really happening on the ‘inside’, a number of prison-authors were, like Bosman, students of language and authors in their own right. They loved language and used it to create something spectacular, whether a novel or a poem. Thus, in writing about their prison experiences, many of them were doing what they did anyway – writing. Bosman says that in his fourth year a wave of consciousness swept over the prison and all and sundry began to write their autobiographies. “And what a lot of lies they wrote, too: many of them brought their manuscripts to me to read … and they would have some snappy titles for the junk they wrote, too…. behind this urge on the part of the convicts to express themselves in prose autobiographies there was a number of factors that I need not go into now” (1999: 154–55). According to Gready, “prisoners write to restore a sense of self and world, to reclaim the ‘truth’ from the apartheid lie, to seek empowerment in an oppositional ‘power of writing’ by writing against the official text of imprisonment” (1993: 489).

7. Prison culture and diction

Another typical characteristic of prison novels is the use of prison language or ‘boob slang.’ In the prisons, the inmates create various terms for everyday occurrences or for people whom they encounter. Bosman introduced this diction into his writing and thereby set a pattern for later authors to emulate. The use of prison diction, according to Andersen, begins in the title of the novel where Bosman refers to prison: “the prison community has its own language … what Bosman calls ‘boob slang’. So are
the words ‘cold stone jug’ which obviously refer to the prison itself” (1992a: 16). In the latest edition of the novel, Gray includes in his introduction a glossary of the prison language used in *Cold Stone Jug*. The reader will encounter words such as “blue”, meaning high, “pipe” meaning to spot or see and “screw”, meaning warder. It is typical of the writers of prison literature to include such language in their writing both to orient the reader and to some degree purely out of habit. Perhaps they could only really adequately describe this unique world in language unique to that world. This language changes over time and between prisons but the constant is that there is always some type of prison language in this literature.

Gray refers to prison language as “prison argot” (1999: 37) and describes the development of this diction in Bosman’s writing: Bosman’s “article, called ‘South African Slang’, stresses the contributions of Afrikaans and black languages to the basic convict vocabulary, otherwise derived mostly from the East End of London, District Six and Fordsburg” (1999: 37).

Gray goes on to remark that the prison vocabulary “constitutes the core of what a later inmate defines as ‘Central English’, evidently still petrified there” (1999: 38). Prison language, according to this inmate, consists of more than a list of common prison vocabulary; it involves a completely new way of speaking. He lists as current [in an article written in 1974] all the syntactical features which Bosman used in his recorded speech; the double negative (I haven’t got nothing); the misuse of parts of speech (Do it good); the dropped auxiliaries (I done it) and prepositions (Don’t swear me), with the historic present tense used to such vivid effect (So I says to the Bombardier…) (Gray 1999: 38).

Prison life is a completely new context in which to write. This fact in itself separates prison literature from all other writing. It comes about as a result of imprisonment – the hostile space. In writing about his prison experience and the culture in which he found himself, Bosman introduces a
setting into literature unlike any other that came before in South African literature. Andersen says, “a prison is a microcosm with its own infinite variety. It has its own culture – its customs, its currency, its distinctive habiliment, its education, its health and religious services, language, laws, music, social strata, and if it is the Pretoria Central, or what Bosman calls the Swartklei Great Prison, it has its own industry and trade” (1992a: 15).

All of the facets mentioned by Andersen can be seen in *Cold Stone Jug* and each one is teased out and examined within this chapter in greater detail. Prison customs were examined under the sub-heading of sociological elements found in this literature while themes like laughter, religion, music and prison diction all merit their own discussion. In Chapter Three, Bosman refers to education in terms of this new culture in which he finds himself: “They say there are three kinds of education: a classical education, a scientific education, and dagga” (1999: 76). Many of the prison-authors refer to the education that they received in prison, whether traditional, like the completion of a degree, or the ‘prison education’ where they learnt a whole new way of living, like smoking dagga.

Dagga also ties in with prison currency. Prisoners did not have money and so they had to use what they had in order to acquire commodities like dagga: “the price for it was high, a single stoppie of dagga being reckoned as the equivalent of twenty doppies (or a whole week’s ration) of tobacco” (1999: 71).

The social strata in prison is based on the time a prisoner has been there, or the number of times he has been imprisoned and the crime he committed. The prisoners were differentiated through the clothes that they wore:

the ordinary convict wears a brown corduroy jacket … the indeterminate sentence convict wears a blue serge jacket …. In the prison the blue coat occupies a position of some degree of importance … a blue coat is even higher than a murderer. One’s prestige inside the prison is in indirect proportion to the length of the sentence one is serving and is also based on the number of times one has been convicted. (1999: 49)

This type of prison hierarchy still continues today and can be seen in all prison literature.
8. Theories of prison literature

8.1 Existentialism

_Cold Stone Jug_ can be seen as Bosman’s attempt to make sense of his existence in prison. The following quotation comes from Chapter Eight, which describes Bosman’s being given a job to do outside of the prison walls. While on the pavement, he sees the wife and daughter of a prison warder walk past. The way in which this incident is described and the importance Bosman ascribes to it show his desperate search for some sort of purpose:

During the many months that followed, of my sojournment inside the walls, that saunter along the dusty road was a warm and luscious memory for me … and I would look at my feet, alone in my cell for many nights thereafter, and I would think that these feet, shod in these same boots, had walked down that road, once, and had got red dust on them, had walked in the same dust in which people of the outside world had walked, in which that girl and that woman had walked. And thinking like that I would not feel cut off from the world at all. For my boots were tangible proof that I was one with the earth and with life; proof – that any court of law would accept – that I belonged with people. (1999: 163)

8.2 New Historicism

This theory involves the parallel reading of the novel with a non-literary text that is historical in nature. The discussion of the historical value of prison literature shows how this theory of literature comes into play.

8.3 Stylistics

It has already been seen in the discussion of prison diction how the technical linguistic features of prison literature give added meaning to the text. In the case of _Cold Stone Jug_, this is especially true in terms of the vocabulary used. According to Gray, Bosman says in one of his columns for _The South African Opinion_ (June 1946) that he had been afforded exceptional facilities for studying prison slang first hand, and rather extensively. And I believe that in this tarnished word-currency, which starkly
illuminates the mode of life of a little known and rather terrible world, we have something that comes very near to the earthy side of real poetry. It is something that has genuine literary significance: the fact that a few rough and sullied words can lay bare the whole inner life of a criminal, and make a prison up in a moment, with its gates and walls and warders, in sunshine and in shadow. (1999: 37)

9. Thematic concerns

9.1 Violence

Violence can be an everyday occurrence within prison. Bosman mentions the violence he encounters, thereby making this a theme that will become common to prison literature as a whole. The violence in *Cold Stone Jug* comes in many forms. Bosman recalls the fact that lashes were often part of a prisoner’s sentence and, in the course of a day, a warden would often hit a convict over the head with his baton: “I know how I felt about that convict, how I envied him, how infinitely privileged I felt he was to be able to be regarded by a warder as a live person, as somebody that could be hit over the head. For no warder would dream of hitting a condemned man with a baton. To a warder a condemned man was something already dead” (1999: 53).

Violence also comes in the form of prisoner on prisoner. Bosman himself was involved in some violent altercations. One that was particularly violent occurs in Chapter Six where Bosman recalls a fight that he had with an inmate called Slangvel. This fight ended up with Bosman hitting Slangvel with a five-pound stone hammer: “... there were many nights, after that, when I was lying alone in my cell in the section, and I remembered my attack on Slangvel in the stone-yard, that I was overcome with terror at the thought of what might have happened. I might have hit him too hard with that hammer and he might have died” (1999: 129).
9.2 Awareness of death

Bosman, like other prison novelists, shows an acute awareness of death. This awareness must have been heightened for Bosman because of the death that he caused and the fact that initially he was sentenced to death. Folli states that “capital punishment is an issue that looms large throughout the book” (1994: 42). He makes constant reference to the regular hangings that take place in the prison and goes into quite a lot of detail as to how the hangings took place. But, as was mentioned earlier, Bosman’s recollections of events such as these lack emotion and he recalls them purely from the point of view of a spectator. It is only at the start of the novel where he shows any real emotion to this constant exposure to death. He says that “the hangings are the worst part of the life in prison … hanging like a pall over the inmates of the prison, warders as well as convicts” (1999: 51). He goes on to say: “I dislike according so much space to the details of hangings, but these things loom like a shadow over the prison all the time, like an unpleasant odour, and they make life inside the prison a lot gloomier than it would otherwise be” (1999: 52).

Many of the more recent prison-authors share the same perspective on death but not necessarily on hangings because in later years, hangings were used to a lesser extent. The theme of death continues in *Cold Stone Jug*, with mention of a warder who died, fellow inmates who died and the constant reminder in terms of the mortuary that he saw on a daily basis. “When a man died in prison, either naturally or through the rope, he was first taken to the mortuary for dissection. After that, with a piece of sacking thrown over him, he would be carted by wheelbarrow through the mortuary gate and into the workshops’ yard, where a truck waited to remove him for burial. The dead and the living alike, leaving the confines of the penal section of the prison, had to make their way through the mortuary gate” (1999: 81).
9.3 Other common themes

9.3.1 Time

This is an issue about which one would naturally expect a prisoner to write. Prisoners are aware of the time that they have been sentenced to spend in prison, the time lost from their lives, the time spent away from their families and the passing of time in each day of their stay in prison. Andersen says that “time, however, has two dimensions in a prison that houses a condemned man. For the prisoner confronting death, time flies on swift wings. For the reprieved man who learns that his sentence has been ‘commuted’ to life, with a probable effective maximum of twenty years, time undergoes a rapid transformation” (1992a: 17). In stating this, Andersen is not only showing how time is a theme common to prison literature, but also that the meaning of time differs from prisoner to prisoner. This is clearly seen in prison literature where an author like Bosman first expects the death sentence and then is frustrated when he is not released on time. “Look, you’ve done a long stretch, already, … what’s a few extra months?” (1999: 195). For the warder, time spent in prison was irrelevant but for the prisoner, in this case Bosman, who was expecting to be released on the day in question, extra time would have been devastating. Roberts says, “the idea of spending time or life in prison began to take on physical proportions” (1985: 68).

9.3.2 Separation and Freedom

This theme is highlighted by prison-authors by their constant reference to their families, the outside world and their visitation rights. Lenta suggests that Bosman goes even further in mentioning the Mother’s Day ceremony that he attends (recounted in Chapter One of the novel). She says, “it introduces the idea that prisoners may lose touch with the upper world from which they have come” (1992: 60). The fact that the prisoners took so much
pleasure in participating in a ceremony that somehow unites them with what is happening on the ‘outside’ shows the depth of their awareness of being separated.

Folli suggests that the theme of separation in *Cold Stone Jug* is highlighted by Bosman’s use of personal pronouns. He uses ‘we’ and ‘us’ when referring to the prisoners and ‘they’ when referring to those on the “outside” (1994: 32).

### 9.3.3 Loss of personal identity

Like the other writers discussed later, Bosman shows how one loses one’s identity in the prison system. All that is expected of the prisoner is obedience. The prisoner is not expected to think or give opinions. This is very trying for an intellectual man such as Bosman who for most of his life had searched for and acquired knowledge. The prison warders tell the inmates that “you mustn’t call a convict by his name … you must call him by his number” (1999: 124). The fact that the prisoner is stripped of his personal possessions and of his clothes, already removes a sense of self from the individual, but to take away his name, the only thing left to the prisoner in terms of identity, strips him of his identity altogether. It is remarkable how most prison writers at one time or another refer to their number or aliases that are used in prison. I do not believe that one can comprehend the devastation felt at the losing of your identity. This is another characteristic introduced by Bosman that continues without exception, through all prison writing.

But I found that I wasn’t a person at all. I wasn’t me…What was really me was a lot of papers, dog-eared and yellowed with the years, lying between two cardboard covers and tied up with green string, in a filing cabinet at head office… My real individuality, my real *me*, were those papers in a filing cabinet. (1999:196)

Apart from losing a sense of identity, one can see that Bosman was in fact an outsider within the prison. “The identity of ‘murderer’ is what allows him, by no means always, but, as the middle-aged author can see, sufficiently, to preserve his sense of himself as spectator, analyst and
therefore artist…” (Lenta 1992: 63). In the preamble to the novel, Bosman recalls the conversation that takes place between the prisoners in the cells in Marshall Square upon his arrest. It is in this conversation that Bosman first sets himself up as an outsider. The prisoners are discussing the various crimes they committed and were arrested for and when it comes to Bosman’s turn and he tells the others that he is in for murder. “The whole dozen of them, moved right across to the other side, to the corner that was furthest away from me” (1999: 46).

Being an outsider in prison, it became easier for Bosman to observe others. As can be seen in his other writings, Bosman had a passion for humanity and his intense study thereof is one of the reasons for his success as a writer. In prison, Bosman lost his own identity and so began to study those of others, whether other inmates or prison officials. This is what makes this particular prison novel unique: it tells the stories of so many others. Often prison writers are so caught up in the writing of their own experience that they only make brief mention of other individuals whom they encounter in prison. These authors focus on individuals with whom they were in regular contact or those who directly affected their own personal existence. Bosman, on the other hand, takes the time to tell the stories of others. In so doing he shows that others too were suffering at the hands of the inhumane warders and eating the slop called food. He makes the reader aware of the fact that even though he is one prisoner who can share his story, there are hundreds – if not thousands – just like him with their own particular story to tell. In writing about the lives of others, Bosman is acknowledging them as human beings, giving back the identity prison life took away from them and to some extent possibly even restoring some of his own identity. He, however, highlights his status as an outsider in writing about the lives of others. This can be seen in his use of pronouns. He refers to the other prisoners as “them” and not as “us.”
9.3.4 Laughter

Bosman’s ironic style of writing can be compared to the traditions of Gothic fiction. This is a facet of his writing that is not particularly common to prison literature as a whole. The devices used in Gothic literature are an attempt to draw the reader into a closed world. This would certainly be true in both Bosman’s case as well as that of all prison-authors because there is no world that is more closed than that of a prisoner. It is a uniquely hostile space. Gothic literature is traditionally full of grotesque realities and develops an atmosphere of despair and anguish. It seems ironic to suggest that this type of imagery can be found in Bosman’s writing when it has already been shown how part of the uniqueness of this particular prison novel lies in the use of humour. Laughter can, however, turn to hysteria and hysteria to madness. This ties in with Bosman’s descriptions of hangings and the dead in prison. “After that [the dissection], with a piece of sacking thrown over him, he would be carted by wheel-barrow through the mortuary gate … where a truck waited to remove him for burial” (1999: 81). The novel is full of such descriptions, subtly interspersed with humorous recollections to intensify the horrors of prison life.

Bosman is one of the few prison writers who introduced comedy into his writing about prison. Dickson refers to the novel as being a “tragi-comedy. The tragedy of the diminution and waste of human beings is never explicitly pointed out to the reader… And under all the humor of the book lies this knowledge shadowing the funniest passages” (1975: 175). This style of writing is masterful because Bosman never diminishes the tragedy of prison life, but makes it more palatable for the reader through the use of humour in his writing. Cronin declares that “much of the wit of the book consists in turning things … inside out” (quoted in Gray 1999: 142). This is certainly true when one considers that Bosman refers to “laughter in the shadow of the gallows.” It could be argued that, on some psychological level, to find some amusement within prison life was merely a means of
survival for Bosman. This is yet another facet of the framework that is
continued in the writing of a number of prison-authors. Laughter is good for
the soul and nothing could be better for someone who is imprisoned and for
Bosman, “it had driven the madness out of his stomach” (1999: 187). At the
beginning of the novel Bosman mentions that those who were imprisoned
for an indeterminate time have ‘I. S.’ sewn on the lapels of their jackets.
Bosman took this to mean, “I’m settled” (1999: 12). Lionel Abrahams,
commenting on Cold Stone Jug, said, “at every joke my impulse was to
weep as well as laugh” (1952). But Bosman’s governing desire was to
entertain and this could possibly have been the underlying motivation for
including humour in this otherwise tragic account.

Some critics have suggested that Bosman’s use of humour and of
Gothic imagery to describe the macabre is possibly a sign of his own
madness that came about because of his prison experience. Bosman
suggests in the novel that he might in fact be going a little mad and so we
must begin to doubt and to question what he says. “Because the thought of
going mad inside the prison was a terrible thing. Every single convict in the
place had a lurking fear of its happening to him. Because, periodically, a
convict went mad. And you never knew whom it was going to happen to
next” (1999: 167). Cronin says that the laughter in Cold Stone Jug is
overdone and “where in most other South African prison literature a moral
and political position breaks through the comfortable distance, in Cold
Stone Jug it is the horrible account of Bosman’s mental breakdown that
adds a new tautness. Suddenly, as it falters, we can no longer be so certain
about the authority of the narrative voice” (in Gray 1986: 142). This point
certainly brings with it a number of questions that will remain unanswered,
unless of course, it is Bosman’s undeniable genius, his gifts as a raconteur
that are in evidence.

But I had learnt one thing. And that was that I was mad, stone mad. And that all the
other people in the world were mad, also. And I learnt that what I had to do was to
play-act sane. And I am still doing that same thing. I am still play-acting sane: it has
come easy to me, with the years. (1999: 201)
“Is this written in earnest? Or ironically in jest? Perhaps the answer is: just a bit of both” (in Gray 1986: 142). What is ironic about the theme of laughter introduced into the framework of prison literature, is Bosman’s seeming lack of emotion in *Cold Stone Jug*. This is another characteristic typical of Bosman, not of prison literature as a whole.

What is common is the theme and reference to laughter that can be found in the writings of many of the more modern prison-authors. Sachs says that through laughter Bosman was able to “bring under control the tensions and strains with which he had entered life” (1971: 31). This is true not only of Bosman and his prison experience but of all prisoners. Bosman not only introduces a common theme to prison literature, but a coping mechanism for other prisoners too.

### 9.3.5 Singing

Bosman makes reference to the singing and music that he hears in prison. As mentioned earlier, this is a unique part of prison life. Singing is most commonly found on death row and among prisoners who were in isolation. It becomes a form of communication for these prisoners. Andersen suggests that “it is a world that has its own music, ‘genuine prison songs’ which Bosman has heard neither before [nor] since coming out of prison” (1992a: 16).

I thought it was sad that you could work out how long a man had been in prison when you heard him sing. You could work out the number of years by his repertoire. I wonder if it is the same thing with a caged singing bird, if the bird remembers only the notes that he heard in the woodland, long ago and far away. (1999: 88)

Singing is often written about in prison writing and must therefore be considered a common theme of this literature. The reasons for the singing that took place in the various prisons and heard by the individual authors may range from communication, to rebellion and the providing of solidarity. Whatever the reason, singing took place, nonetheless.
9.3.6 The use of metaphor and symbolism

The use of symbolism in *Cold Stone Jug* is most obvious in the sketches and stories of the other prisoners. The way in which Bosman offers fragments of the lives of others is suggestive of the fragments he finds in his own life during his imprisonment: “…but the fragmented style of the text embodies the absurd nature of prison life as well as the shattered life of the inmates…” (Folli 1994: 38). The novel is also full of images of death: the rope, the mortuary, and genuflection. Bosman’s use of Gothic devices (as described above) can also be regarded as being symbolic in nature.

Symbols and the use of metaphor (such as Bosman’s use of the clown in Chapter One) have become typical of prison literature. Roberts states, “there are, for instance, countless images of birds as symbols of freedom; expected references to the smallness of space and the expansibility of time; the frequent transformation of women … and the inevitable glorification of life on the outside” (1985: 65–66).

9.3.7 DDD syndrome

Debility, dependency and dread are found throughout this novel. These three factors tie in closely with the other themes already discussed. The idea of debility is particularly relevant to Bosman, especially in terms of his inability to write while in prison. He felt that the atmosphere in prison stifled his creative imagination. Secondly, prisoners become very dependent on the routine in prison. It is the only form of stability to which they can cling. “Now, I have written more or less everything that happens normally in prison” (1999: 88). Thirdly, dread comes in many forms, most of which have been covered in the themes of death, separation and time.

Nearly all these characteristics can be found in the prison writings of Breytenbach, Lewin, Sachs, Cronin, Brutus, Kathrada, First, Makoere and Mashinini (each to be examined in detail later), as well as in the writings of
other prison-authors not mentioned. Cronin believes that somehow, whether directly or indirectly, many prison-authors came into contact with Bosman’s work and thus the tradition of common characteristics in prison literature was begun. As each of the above authors and their writings are examined in detail in the next few chapters, one will see these similarities manifest themselves time and time again.

**PROBLEMS ATTENDANT UPON USING COLD STONE JUG AS THE FOUNDATIONAL TEXT FOR SOUTH AFRICAN PRISON LITERATURE IN GENERAL**

There are issues that could arise and become problematic to this study. It is impossible to find a perfect text when one is searching for a foundational piece of writing in terms of arguing for as new category of literature. In the case of *Cold Stone Jug*, the first issue that may be regarded as a cause for concern is the fact that Bosman was not a political prisoner. Although this issue was explained and motivated earlier in this chapter, it is important enough to add further substantiation here. As has been previously suggested, prison literature in South Africa is often considered synonymous with political literature. Lenta states in her article on the novel that this distinction between *Cold Stone Jug* and the writing of political prisoners needs to be made. She goes on to say that “the testimonies of political prisoners do have some affinities with *Cold Stone Jug* [because] prison life has not changed sufficiently since Bosman was released in 1930” (1992: 57). Other political prisoners in South Africa, at the time of the apartheid government, were more disadvantaged in the prison system than a prisoner like Bosman, a convicted murderer. But the interrogation techniques that gradually break down the political prisoner’s ability to resist can be paralleled to the abusive language used by the warders in *Cold Stone Jug* (1992: 57). This and the other similarities shown in the above discussion therefore negate the ‘problem’ of Bosman not having been a political
prisoner. It has also been argued that Bosman was aware of the socially
destructive nature of the prison system – that he was, in other words,
conscious of the repressive role that this system played in society. In his
article on Cold Stone Jug, Jeremy Cronin asserts that Bosman achieves
continuity with other writers in this genre mainly because many of the
details he supplies remain substantially unchanged (in MacKenzie 2000:
27). Roberts provides further substantiation of this by saying that “it makes
little difference whether the author or protagonist be felon, political
dissenter, or a Josef K: a prison is a prison ... Be the detainee thug or
saboteur, murderer or merely doubting intellectual, his experience of arrest
and incarceration will follow a pattern” (1985: 61). It is this very pattern
that Bosman details in the writing of Cold Stone Jug, setting down on paper
a framework that has always existed but transforming it into literature.

The second issue that might be regarded as problematic is that Cold
Stone Jug is a novel. Can a study such as this compare a novel to poetry,
letters and diaries? What is being compared and contrasted in this study is
not the form of writing. The fact that prison literature comes in so many
different forms is vital to part of the argument being set up in this study –
viz. that prison literature is indefinable because of the many genres it
includes and the forms it takes. It is however necessary for the sake of
completeness to include the different types of writing into this study. The
important aspect that is being examined both in relation to Cold Stone Jug
and prison literature as a whole is the content of the writing – and thus a
comparative analysis of poetry, novels, diaries and letters can be profitable.
In this sense the common content is akin to the setting of prison literature.
As was shown in the earlier discussion on the setting of prison literature, all
the writers found themselves in a hostile space upon being imprisoned and
thus their writings in and about this hostile space provide a fruitful basis for
comparison.

There can be no doubt that Bosman was massively influential in
shaping South African prison literature, and this is in no small measure due
to the inherent qualities of *Cold Stone Jug*. The novel is thus both a forerunner of South African prison literature and also a masterpiece in its own right. It could be argued that because, for the most part, South African prison literature is synonymous with political literature, Bosman’s work is outdated and no longer forms part of this body of writing. Critics agree, however, that the novel has an enduring significance. Schalkwyk, for instance, writes that “*Cold Stone Jug* [is] a work that remains the classic of South African prison writing, despite the massive extension of the genre under apartheid” (1994: 23).
A novel is generally conceived of as a *fictional narrative* of a certain scope and length. This definition is problematic in relation to prison literature because works in this category typically manifest an interplay between fiction and non-fiction, as discussed in Chapter Three. The prison writings of Bosman, Breytenbach, Lewin, for example, are all slightly fictionalized autobiographies and prison memoirs. How then does one distinguish a novel from an autobiography or memoir? This problem is particularly pertinent to prison literature because this writing “deliberately blurs distinctions between disciplines and genres” (Sobanet 2002: 1).

Both *Cold Stone Jug* and *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* are referred to as prison memoirs, prison novels and autobiographical works. Neither is an autobiography in the true sense of the word. Folli notes that the reason for this is that they do not dwell on the ‘autos’; “nor [are they] novels, for, as fiction, [they] depend on fact” (1994: 53). Folli does not leave us with much choice, then. A novel contains fictitious prose, which many of these writings do include. However, the factual element as noted by Folli leans towards the classification ‘prison memoir.’ According to Jacobs a prison memoir reveals certain salient characteristics:

> In the first place, the prison memoir is consciously narrated by a subject whose identity is established by his experience as a ‘political prisoner’…a second distinctive feature of the prison book is its Dedication which affirms a continuing community of the imprisoned…Thirdly, the actual narrative of the detention or prison process has identifiable contours: an autobiographical introduction; an account of arrest and pre-trial detention; the individual response to solitary confinement; the various methods of interrogation and degrees of torture… (1991b: 116)

According to this definition, many, but not all, of what I refer to as prison novels could be reclassified as prison memoirs. How then would we classify those writings that do not conform to these characteristics? Jacobs concludes by saying, “the prison memoir is best approached within the general category of autobiography” (1991b: 125). It has already been
established that one cannot strictly classify these writings as purely autobiographical; therefore, for the most part, these writings must be considered ‘faction’, where fiction is combined with fact. This somewhat contradictory discussion can be clarified by examining the following: Eakin says, “the self that is the centre of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure for autobiographical truth is not a fixed but evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation” (1988: 3). If one is to accept this, then the accepted definition of autobiography no longer stands because one can include fiction into what has been believed to be writings of pure fact. Eakin makes a valid point, though, that is particular to prison literature. The prisoners, as will be seen in the discussion to follow, are all in a process of self-discovery in their new environment. Therefore the writing would be autobiographical with “fictive structure[s].”

This then not only affects our reading of these writings – because one may not always be able to discern the difference between fiction and fact in them – but also means that they offer a unique perspective on prison life through the use of ‘faction.’ Thus these texts could be interpreted and read as factual, fictional or both. If read as autobiographies, the emphasis would fall on the documentary value, whereas if read as fictional narratives, the issues that the prison-author is attempting to highlight could be lost.

It is probably easiest to refer to these writings as confessional narratives or prison books. These classifications encompass the autobiographical as well as the fictional. There are, however, problems endemic to these classifications too. Some prison-authors completely fictionalize their prison experience. “For various reasons I have written a work of fiction. Fiction, but projecting a hard and bitter truth; fiction mirroring non-fiction, true incidents and episodes. The characters are all fictional, including, in a sense, myself” (Zwelonke 1973: 3). Although purely fictional accounts are not examined in this study, one must take them into account when attempting to classify the form in which they were written.
Autobiography, memoir, confessional narrative or book? I believe that for the sake of clarity these writings can be referred to as novels. Firstly, there is a basic structure discernible. They are written in prose and are separated by chapters. This is not to suggest that this is the model into which writing must fit in order to be classified as a novel, but rather to propose a working definition for this study. One has to examine content as well as structure in order to classify these writings. The fact that these writings include varying degrees of fictionalization in terms of the content makes it possible to broadly refer to them as novels. Sobanet refers to the prison novel as being

a literary sub-genre that constitutes an intersection of penology (a branch of sociology that focuses on carceral conditions and power structures) and fiction. A form of documentary and testimonial literature … a unique literary modality … due to its artful negotiation of the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. (2002: 1–3)

From this we can see that Sobanet takes into account all the problems and arguments that have been mentioned above and still refers to these writings as ‘prison novels.’

After careful consideration of all the arguments and possibilities as set out in the above discussion, I do not believe that these particular writings will ever be satisfactorily classified into one particular form of writing. I would like to suggest that each author’s work should be examined and classified individually. For the purposes of this study, though, I will refer to these writings as prison novels.

In this chapter, a detailed comparative analysis of two of the best-known prison novels will be undertaken. I will attempt to show those aspects of these particular prisoners’ writing that makes their work forerunners in this body of writing and therefore worthy of close examination. I will also discuss the many similar characteristics that can be found in prison writing, demonstrating how Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug* establishes an important foundation for the prison literature that was to follow. The novels examined in this chapter are viewed through the lens provided by Foucault, with a particular emphasis on the common link
between them – the hostile space in and about which this literature has been written.

It must be pointed out, however, that there are significant differences in the writings that are to be examined and these too must be noted. Were it not for these differences, each prison experience would lose its uniqueness and it would seem as if these prisoners were writing about their individual prison experience according to a given formula. The differences noted when comparing the writings of the prison-novelists found in this chapter and the writings of Bosman can mostly be attributed to the fact that Bosman was not a political prisoner. There are, however, differences within the writings of the two authors under consideration here and, because both were political prisoners, these differences must suggest not only a uniqueness in individual prison-authors’ writings but also a development in the literature as a whole. Breytenbach was writing at the height of apartheid so, therefore, the differences between his work and Lewin’s can largely be attributed to the increasing politicization occurring within South Africa.

Noting the argument as it has been set out – Bosman had a seminal influence, and this accounts for the common characteristics found in the work of other novelists (notwithstanding the unique areas to be found in each individual’s work) – we turn our attention to the novels themselves.

**The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist – Breyten Breytenbach**

Breytenbach was born in Bonnievale in the Cape Province in 1939. After studying at the University of Cape Town, he settled in Europe because of the apartheid regulations that were infiltrating both the university and the country. He was regarded as a refugee by the South African government from 1965 when he married a Vietnamese girl, contravening South Africa’s Immorality Act that considered interracial marriage to be a crime. He began working in and organizing underground anti-apartheid movements in the
hope of building “anti-apartheid infrastructures in white South African communities” (http://www.dialoguepoetry.org). He came back to South Africa in 1974 on a false passport to set up local contacts and to start a resistance movement. The police followed him until his arrest in 1975. He was sentenced to nine years’ imprisonment. After his sudden release in 1982, he accepted French citizenship.

Breytenbach’s prison experience was horrific, to say the least. Like Bosman, Breytenbach believes that prison changed him forever. He was a political prisoner in a country ruled by an apartheid government, with a penal system that neither tolerated nor understood white South Africans who fought against apartheid.

Prison, for me, is the absolute stripping away of all protective layers: sounds are raw, sights are harsh, smells are foul. The scars are there, like tattoos on the mind. You are reduced to the lowest common denominator – being alone (and scared and weak to the point of being suffocated by self-disgust) whilst always being surrounded by others. (1984: 234)

This is Breyten Breytenbach’s hostile space.

He made the following remark about his reason for writing the novel: “I had to write it. I had to purge myself, and this I had to do before memory itself becomes obscured by the deformation of time” (1984: 307).

According to Breytenbach, upon his release, he had an obsessive urge to talk. His talking never ceased. He wanted, over the following weeks and months, to tell his story to anyone who would listen. Eventually someone advised him to talk into a tape and so the shape of this novel began to take form. He himself says that it was the talking into the tape that defined the inner structure and the tone of the book. His wife would transcribe the tapes and Breytenbach would correct and redraft the transcripts. She would then retype where necessary. He admits that the novel is not objective, but also questions whether it is ever possible to ever find total objectivity. One of the salient points he makes when discussing the writing of this novel is the fact that “a prisoner is not a scholar” (1984: 308). This ties in with a point made in Chapter Three, where it was suggested that not all prison literature is necessarily of a high academic standard.
The novel is divided into four parts. Each part is in turn then divided into chapters and separated by what Breytenbach calls ‘inserts.’ These inserts are postmodernist in nature and I would like to suggest are examples of a free-writing exercise that Breytenbach allowed himself as a means by which to cope with the atrocities of prison life. “The inserts encompass the conditions of introspection and isolation, confinement and infinite self-reflexivity … it is hardly surprising that writing seemed to reflect nothing but the mirror labyrinth of his living death” (Schalkwyk 1994: 29).

Part one is entitled “The Mouth of Voices and Earth” and serves both as an introduction to the author and a contextualization of his life and the reasons why he was imprisoned. He begins this section by recalling his capture and initial interrogation in the most intimate detail. A vital chapter in this part is Chapter Two, where Breytenbach spends a great deal of time dealing with the theme of writing, and of writing in prison. The third chapter introduces the reader to prison; the hostile space in which Breytenbach is going to be forced to exist. Breytenbach describes his prison life and the prison warders with whom he comes into contact. He explains how his defence began and ends this section by going back in time, recalling how his involvement with anti-apartheid movements began, and, ultimately, led to his arrest. This part, like most of the novel, is constantly interspersed with references to politics and political organizations.

Part two – “A Memory of Sky” – is a lengthy narration of various aspects of Breytenbach’s time in prison. He starts with his sentencing and how he is gradually integrated into the prison system, becoming a “member of the clan” (1984: 111). He talks about the ‘locality’, the prison and its physical appearance, the daily routine, meals, the people he meets, prison authorities, prison jargon and death. This section is thus important on a number of levels. Firstly, it highlights many of the common characteristics that can be found in prison literature. Secondly, Breytenbach includes another section on writing, the act of writing, writing in prison and the reasons therefore. Thirdly, he repeatedly makes mention of the cells, the
hostile spaces for various prisoners, thereby linking his literature with all other genres of prison literature; and, finally, he refers to the power to punish (as suggested by Foucault). His third insert categorically states how the government of the time has the power to punish and, when reading this insert through a Foucauldian lens, we can see how power and knowledge are inextricably tied together.

Part three – “Notes from the Journal of Bangai Bird” – starts with Breytenbach explaining his reasons for writing prison literature, then provides explanatory notes on being detained and interrogated, South African prisons, torture, Afrikaans and a detailed explanation, in the form of an annexure, of the Okhela-Manifesto. The final section of this novel includes thirteen prison poems by Breytenbach that were originally written in Afrikaans.

We now turn our attention to a comparative analysis of this literature. There are a number of similarities between True Confessions and Cold Stone Jug. Breytenbach says: “when you are interested in prison accounts as a genre, you will see that prisons are pretty much the same all the world over” (1984: 309). This is quite a remarkable statement, considering the huge differences that will be noted. Without wishing to overstate the obvious, it is clear that in terms of actual prison experience these two authors encountered much the same as far as the treatment by the warders and fellow inmates, the food which they had to stomach and the daily routine of prison life were concerned. It is clear that they were both exposed to prison jargon, although there were differences in some of the actual terminology, and they both were frustrated by the lack of privacy, poor living conditions and infrequent visitations.

Like Bosman, Breytenbach was exposed to the prison jargon of the day. Many of the prison authors include this ‘prison talk’ in their writing to recapture the essence of prison life and because it is so much a part of their existence in prison. Breytenbach refers, for example, to the “alligators” (1984: 119), which was another term for the “boere”; stones were called
“Soweto confetti” (1984: 142); and general prison terminology was called “boob slang” (1984: 188). “‘Bomb’, says Breytenbach, “is a good example of the typical prison linguistic ingenuity: in the old days one was fed only rice-water when in the punishment cell – rice-water had the association of India, India of Bombay, and Bombay became simply ‘bomb’” (1984: 206). There are many more examples of the use of prison diction throughout this novel; suffice it to say that, as in most prison novels, the use of prison jargon is evident in *True Confessions* too.

The jargon and diction that Breytenbach uses in his novel tie in directly with the tone in which the novel is written. Breytenbach writes his prison experience in a very embittered and sarcastic tone – one that can be compared to the sardonic tone of *Cold Stone Jug*. He does say, however, that his intention in writing the novel was “not to take revenge on a system or a certain people – at least I don’t think it was” (1984: 308). Like Bosman, as an intellectual he is completely frustrated by all that he experiences and it is clear that his prison experience touched him on a deep emotional level. This is manifest in the tone of both novels. The prison authorities were determined to break Breytenbach’s spirit (as was the case with most prisoners) and there are stages in the novel where the reader will suspect that they are quite close to achieving this:

… at that point you are swinging over the abyss holding on to a very slender thread of sanity. It doesn’t take much to split the last fibre and to have you plunging down screaming into the opening-up of completely empty space, a space which is at the same time crowded by voices singing their death … (1984: 25)

The tone of this statement suggests the depth of emotion experienced at this point by Breytenbach. These episodes of fear, where the writing takes on an almost desperate tone, are also evident in *Cold Stone Jug*. The above passage also makes reference to the ever-present hostile space. Breytenbach, like Bosman, becomes aware of the strong possibility of going insane, but, unlike Bosman, is able to control the madness that could have taken over his mind.

Breytenbach’s narration is going to be established as a ‘difference’ in this comparative analysis, but as a result of this difference a similarity
emerges too. By referring to the investigator as ‘I’ or ‘eye’, in his narration, Breytenbach is attempting to create or recreate his identity as ‘prisoner’. This is a dynamic process that is evidenced throughout the novel and his prison experience. Breytenbach attempts to emphasize constant change by showing the irrelevance of identity. According to Zen Buddhism, to which Breytenbach subscribed, emphasis in life should be on continuity and not on identity. “The name you will see under this document is Breyten Breytenbach. That is my name. It is not the only one; after all, what is a name? I used to be called Dick; sometimes I was called Antoine; some knew me as Hervé; others as Jan Blom; then I was Professor …” (1984: 3). This passage indicates not only the unimportance of narrow conceptions of identity for Breytenbach (ones tied to simple acts of naming, for example), but also the pervasive feeling of loss of ‘real’ identity through imprisonment. It also indicates that the penal system has succeeded in reorganizing Breytenbach, as is suggested by Foucault. Routine prison life, in an attempt to reform his soul, has reorganized the way in which he views himself. The fact that identity is not of importance to Breytenbach is of no consequence in terms of the common framework of prison literature.

Bosman’s work shows an awareness of identity, and this awareness can be found in True Confessions. The issue is the parallel awareness of identity in both novels, not the degree of importance accorded to it by the individual author. M. Sienaert in The I of the Beholder, when referring to Breytenbach’s prison writing, suggests that: “there is an effort to exorcise this feeling [of depersonalization], by establishing ‘I’ within the poetical discourse” (2001: 43). If this is in fact true, then no matter how irrelevant identity is for Breytenbach, its existence is nevertheless felt through its irrelevance.

All prison writing is characterized by a strong element of depersonalization and loss of identity. “The whole matter of the disintegration of the ‘I’ on the one hand, and of the compensatory doubling up of the ‘I’ on the other, is by no means a new phenomenon in art and
literature; nor is it an exclusive feature of so-called prison literature” (Sienaert 2001: 44–45). Sienaert appears here to suggest that the awareness of identity is in fact common to prison literature and to this novel in particular. Breytenbach writes in True Confessions that “it is important that you consciously assist at the putting down of the I … the I which blocks the view must disappear by deconception for a sense of movement to be actualized … a feeling of metamorphosis” (1984: 184).

Being aware of his identity or lack thereof exacerbated Breytenbach’s prison experience. After a while, the prisoner is no longer sure as to who he or she is. Upon release, a cleansing process needs to take place so that the prisoner can adapt from his or her identity on the ‘inside’ to his or her restored identity on the ‘outside.’ This cleansing process can take the form of writing. Breytenbach, like Bosman, needed to write to rid himself of the ghost of prison experience, and the structure of his novel shows that often he almost ‘lets go’ in terms of his writing. “The only comfort I am allowing myself is the thought (or the hope?) that recollecting all the events will also allow me to put them out of my mind forever. I am hoping for a purge. (That is why it is important to dredge up everything: what one leaves behind will, like the bloodsucking head of the louse you remove from your skin, start festering)” (1984: 133).

In talking about the purgative process of writing, Bosman introduces an idea that continually reappears throughout the body of prison literature. Bosman, however, does not become obsessive to the same extent that Breytenbach does. From the time of his capture, writing becomes a large part of his prison life. He is forced to write for the special security forces, who captured him, as a means of interrogation. He was not questioned in the usual manner but rather told that all the information required of him, by them, would be provided in written form. “They simply say: ‘Write’; and I’ve written volumes, volumes. My life is eaten up by words. Words have replaced my life” (1984: 8). Bosman desperately wanted an opportunity, the tools and to a certain extent the motivation and ability with which to write,
whereas Breytenbach was forced to write. Initially writing was not a pleasure for him: it was, in his mind, a part of a punishment “… intermingled with voices whispering: ‘Write,’ because to write is to celebrate death. ‘Write why, who, where, when, with what…” (1984: 25). He feels that in this process he is intimately exposing himself to his captors, who will do nothing more than gloat.

This attitude towards writing does however change during the course of his imprisonment. Apart from writing for his captors, Breytenbach uses every possible opportunity to write so much so that he dedicates an entire chapter in the novel to writing and prison. This is a valuable chapter because it gives the reader insight into the act of prison writing.

Breytenbach, like Bosman, becomes a scribe in prison: he writes for the prison authorities, he writes for fellow inmates and he writes for himself. In writing for others, Breytenbach finds a source of empowerment mainly because he feels as though he is inventing the lives of others. We see how Breytenbach scribbles and writes on everything, including newspapers, old envelopes or torn pieces of paper; he writes in an attempt to erase …. Writing becomes for me a means, a way of survival …. Writing is an extension of my senses. It is itself a sense which permits me to grasp, to understand, and to some extent to integrate what was happening to me … I soon realize that it becomes the exteriorisation of my imprisonment …. The maze of words which become alleys, like sentences, the loops which are close-circuits and present no exit, these themselves constitute the walls of my confinement. (1984: 137)

Ultimately, the act of prison writing, constantly referred to in True Confessions, can be summed up as being a process in which Breytenbach “planted words for a living, hoping finally to make some grow sense whose odour may please the masters who are most particular in such matters” (1984: 277).

Bosman remarked on how his prison experience affected his ability to write. One has to question whether or not writing in and about prison affects the language used by these authors. Breytenbach refers to the “evolution of prison language” (1984: 158) when referring to the jargon to which he was to become accustomed. In his interview with Peter Midgley, he stated that “one must keep in mind that a South African prison is a microcosmos of
South African society, where you have condensed manifestation of all the tensions and perhaps also some of the creative potentialities that you would find in larger South African society. For instance, the way language is used and the way it is transformed within the prison environment is something you will find more diluted elsewhere in the country as well” (Goddard and Wessels 1992: 60).

Breytenbach’s writing, like that of other prison-authors, has many of the characteristics found in Cold Stone Jug. We see that True Confessions is autobiographical, includes historical details of South Africa and the South African prison system, has a first-person narrator and includes prison jargon. Other common characteristics found in this novel include the acute awareness of life and death. This was heightened in the time that Bosman, Breytenbach and Lewin (among others) were writing because the death penalty was still routinely used in South Africa. Breytenbach notes: “I remember eating a tomato the morning Engelbrecht and Fourie were hanged, how fresh it tasted, and my being very aware that they would never eat tomatoes again” (1984: 122). One can see from this particular remark that even the senses are magnified because of the constant exposure to death in prison. If the prisoners are so aware of death, they must also be just as acutely aware of life. This is probably one of the most tragic aspects of being in prison – to be so aware of life and yet to be so far removed from the realities of it: “I felt, as every prisoner does very strongly, the need to be able to contribute something to life outside. There remained the urge to communicate, to shout, to get onto the roof … and say ‘I’m here; I’m dead but I’m here – be sure not to forget it!’” (1984: 139). The awareness of life and death is shown in many ways through prison literature. In some cases, prison-authors use symbols, like birds, to illustrate this awareness.

Symbolism, because of its use in Cold Stone Jug, is another common characteristic in all prison literature, and there are also some common symbols. This is especially evident when it comes to the use of birds. Breytenbach often refers to himself as ‘Mr. Bird.’ A bird is of course
frequently used as a symbol of freedom because of its ability to fly away from a situation. Breytenbach captures this symbolism in the novel by continual references to both birds and flying. He in fact refers to the prisoners as birds (1984: 194). This may be a direct reference to the fact that prisoners are often referred to as ‘jail-birds’ or even to the fact that by being imprisoned they have flown from reality to a new world of their own. In one of the inserts he says “flying with the birds signifies that one will dwell with men of foreign nationalities and with strangers. You who come out are free” (1984: 216). This is an implicit reference to birds and freedom. For Breytenbach, prison experience can be compared to a flight, a journey, where the ultimate destination is freedom. This is what he and all other prisoners strive for – freedom. This is not an easy flight, though: “my arms get tired from pretending to be wings” (1984: 217).

Breytenbach’s awareness of death suggests a type of existentialism. The prisoners to whom Breytenbach is referring are attempting to identify their place and function in their new world, while at the same time have their existence acknowledged by those on the outside. Being imprisoned takes the prisoner away from the world, and places him or her in a hostile space. This seclusion brings with it the possibility of being forgotten and literally left to ‘rot’ in jail. This is the most fundamental link in all prison literature – the fact that these writers were in jail, in hostile spaces. Existentialism is a part of prison writing because, as mentioned earlier, the prisoner’s awareness of life is heightened. Breytenbach shows that, for the prisoner, it becomes vital that the outside world is aware of his existence. Even more important for the prisoner is the self-acknowledgement of still being ‘alive’ and being able to make a difference in life, despite being in jail.

Another theoretical device that is useful in exploring this novel is the use of stylistics. Stylistics examines how technical linguistic features of writing enhance the overall meaning of a text. These features include the grammatical structure of a sentence. An unusual feature found in True
Confessions is the use of brackets. Breytenbach puts each chapter heading in brackets. I believe the use of brackets serves two purposes: firstly it signals his postmodern style of writing and secondly it suggests that these sections are almost ‘asides’, separate from the narration of his prison-experience as a whole. The use of brackets once again highlights a difference in style.

He often makes use of under-lexicalization when there is a scarcity of suitable words to describe specific concepts: “Prisoners are obsessed by time. One ‘does time’, or you push it. You are a ‘timer’…” (1984: 126). Foucault says that the prisoner is organized and supervised through time and space. Breytenbach’s obvious awareness of time, in the above quote, and in the novel as a whole, validates the claim made in Chapter Four of Foucault’s suggestion that ‘time’ is a vital concept in prison literature.

The marked differences found in the Breytenbach prison novel, when compared to Bosman’s, serve a double purpose. Firstly, the differences illustrate how, in a comparative analysis of examples of prison literature, we can conclusively state that there are marked differences – enough to merit mention. Secondly, the differences indicate a development taking place in prison literature: the texts that were written after Cold Stone Jug are by no means merely mirror images of Bosman’s text. The prisoners writing after 1940 were mostly imprisoned for political crimes, and therefore their writings and their prison experiences would necessarily be different. We will now examine some of the differences between the prison writings of Breyten Breytenbach and Herman Charles Bosman.

In terms of actual prison conditions, the differences would emanate from the fact that Bosman was imprisoned for murder while Breytenbach was a political prisoner. The prison system dealt with these criminals in different ways – the time period for which they were imprisoned and the prisons in which they were incarcerated. But, as previously mentioned, a prison is a prison, and therefore the above-mentioned differences in no way erase the similarities found in prison literature too. “This, the texture of life
in prison, the absence of texture, or at least the way you experience it, will be different from one jail to another. It will depend on what stage you have reached in your time. There will also be regional differences between, say, the Transvaal and the Cape. What remains the same is the diet, the clothes you wear, and inevitably the type of relationship you have with authority” (Breytenbach 1984: 126). This quote succinctly accounts for many of the differences and similarities found in *Cold Stone Jug, The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist, Bandiet* and, indeed, all other prison writing.

The narrative style used by Breytenbach in *True Confessions* must be examined. He writes in the first-person, speaking to an investigator, an unknown person, who has been appointed to find out about Breytenbach’s prison experience. The use of the first-person narrative is typical of prison literature. What is markedly different in this novel, however, is the way in which Breytenbach ‘talks’ to the investigator about his experience. We are told that Breytenbach dictated this novel onto a Dictaphone, and that his wife then typed it up for him. This could be the reason for the ‘monologue’ style in which the novel has been ‘written.’ The use of the investigator to whom Breytenbach speaks makes this novel unique in terms of prison literature and provides one of the reasons why this particular piece of prison literature should be taken note of and included in this study. We find out at a later stage in the novel that the investigator is someone who was appointed by a revolutionary black South African movement to examine his case.

Another unique facet of Breytenbach’s narration is the metamorphosis that the investigator undergoes throughout Breytenbach’s novel. The investigator is not comparable to Bosman’s narrator. Bosman does not talk directly to him or interact with him on any level at all. Unlike in Breytenbach’s novel, there is no evidence of Bosman’s narrator changing at all. Breytenbach begins the novel by referring to and talking to Mr. Investigator. This title – Mr. Investigator – changes throughout the novel to Mr. I or Mr. Eye. Breytenbach says “the ‘I’ becomes an observation point, a
point of passage, through which the images and the perceptions move” (Sienaert 2001: 15). This is directly related to the identity formation that Breytenbach experienced in prison and re-experiences through the telling of his story. Whether one considers True Confessions a novel or a memoir, it is indisputable that this writing is self-reflexive. The Buddhist notion of ‘no self’ underpins Breytenbach’s writing and so the ‘I’ in his writing could simply be considered a medium for observation. Therefore Mr. Investigator would be an observer, an outsider who could never relate to or understand Breytenbach’s experiences but could ‘view’ them.

One of the most obvious points of difference between Bosman and Breytenbach’s writing is the political content of True Confessions. The fact that Breytenbach was a political prisoner makes it unsurprising that there are political statements in his writings about his prison experience. This leads to the question as to how this study can profitably compare Bosman with other prison writers when one would expect most of the content of political prison literature to be completely unrelated to Bosman prison writing. The number of marked similarities between the work of Breytenbach and that of Bosman (as shown earlier) will clearly show the ease with which non-political prison literature can be compared to political prison literature. This difference is vital because, in South Africa, prison literature is often considered synonymous with political literature. The pervasive and sustained influence of Cold Stone Jug, however, complicates this synonymy. Bosman does make reference to political systems, but these are limited. For the vast majority of prison-authors, their imprisonment was as a result of their political aspirations or involvement and thus, as political prisoners, their writing would include this theme. The fact that such marked differences arise in the literature as a result of the political affiliations and ‘crimes’ committed by these prison-authors, suggests an important development in the writing from the time Bosman was published to the work of more recent prison-authors, released from Robben Island. As is suggested by the New Historicians, these works should be read in
conjunction with the histories of the time in which the literature was written. It will then be clearly established that the development in South African prison literature parallels the development and strengthening of the apartheid regime in South Africa. South African history shows how apartheid began with the introduction of separatis policies and how, through time, racial discrimination increased through the passing of stringent laws which ensured that whites remained superior at all cost. The literature written mirrors the tightening of these laws, thus explaining the obvious development manifest in the writings of later prison-authors.

Breytenbach was horrified by the atrocities of the apartheid system and believed “more than ever, that the system existing in South Africa is against the grain of everything that is beautiful and hopeful and dignified in human history; that it is a denial of humanity…” (1984: 59). The novel is distinctive because the previous government censored parts of it and Breytenbach includes inflammatory remarks about the government and the treatment of the majority of citizens in South Africa. He said that it was not his intention to produce a political text, but prison literature crosses the boundaries of so many fields of study that politics too can be included in this list. He ends the novel with chapters on South African prisons, on being Afrikaans and a note for Azania. These sections are overtly political in nature. He even goes so far as to make political predictions for South Africa, suggesting eventual majority rule. All these inclusions tie prison and political literature together.

Breytenbach puts together a carefully organized set of arguments that pull together the validations of his actions. These arguments involve looking at the actual act of writing, the retelling of other prisoners’ stories, his political dealings and aspirations, the concepts of freedom and imprisonment and the many relationships which one encounters as a prisoner – between guards, the prisoners, the prison and the outer world. “Thus, in most respects, Breytenbach has covered the possible angles and has deliberately tried to provide us with the material we need to engage with
his story. In this respect the book is quite unique among prison accounts” (Davies 1990: 162).

This novel must be considered a key text in the category of prison novels. A reason for this is stated in Jacobs’s article “Breyten Breytenbach and the South African Prison Book”, where Jacobs says that “*The True Confessions of the Albino Terrorist* can be seen as the culmination of the entire tradition of South African prison literature – autobiography, fiction, poetry and drama …” (1986: 98). Breytenbach employs a style that is typical of post-modern writing: his use of parody is quite distinct from that used by other prison-authors. Jacobs goes on to say that even in the title of this novel one can identify the use of parody. The use of parody is found in the beginning of the text through the use of the report form, with Breytenbach reporting to an investigator. The use of parody continues throughout the novel in various forms.

As mentioned, *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* is also unique because of the postmodern style of writing that has been used by Breytenbach. Davies in *Writers in Prison* says, “in one respect, all prison writing is post-modern, or post-classical or post-Renaissance. [Breytenbach’s writing] stands in sharp contrast to these [typical post-modern] positions. In many respects, precisely because he speaks from prison experience and out of a personal sense of the ‘riven situations’, Breytenbach cannot adopt the conservative/apocalyptic complacency of many of the post-modernist writers … Breytenbach is a post-modernist with a difference” (Davies 1990: 162–163). Breytenbach’s writing falls into the definition of post-modernism in that it reflects on a society that has lost the values of rationality, faith in human freedom and the future. Postmodernism is a widely used term, embracing so many spheres that Eagleton suggests that it is threatening “to collapse into meaninglessness” (1996: 200). For the purpose of this study, postmodernism will be defined as that which “being wary of absolute origins, it draws its attention to its own ‘intertextual’ nature … distaste[ful] of fixed boundaries” (Eagleton 1996: 202). One can
thus assume that Breytenbach’s writing is part of the spirit of the age that resulted in his being arrested and imprisoned. Breytenbach was a political prisoner embodying a spirit of resistance; the reason for his imprisonment in the first place. This would explain this particular difference in his and Bosman’s writing. The depth of this resistance also differs from early political prison-authors like Sachs and Lewin because as the government became more stringent with regard to their policies of repression, so too did the resistance become more passionate and violent in nature. We can thus conclude that part of the reason for the difference in style is the time in which the imprisonment took place, the political beliefs of the prison-authors and the spirit of resistance of the prison-author him or herself. These differences ultimately result in a notable evolution in this literature.

If one were forced to classify Bosman’s writing in terms of some kind of literary classification, some could call it ‘modernist’. Modernism “brought down most of the structure of pre-twentieth-century literature … there was a rejection of traditional realism. Some of the important characteristics include: emphasis on subjectivity… a blurring of distinctions between genres…, a new liking for fragmented forms…, a tendency towards ‘reflexivity’” (Barry 1995: 81–82). Breytenbach’s novel, according to the definitions offered above, cannot be considered ‘modernist’ because he does not employ a righteous stand against the system that imprisoned him. Barry highlights the differences between ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodernism’ by saying that “the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it … postmodernism rejects the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ art which was important in modernism and believes in excess…” (1995: 84). Thus, by definition, Breytenbach does not take a modernist stance at all. He is an Afrikaner, willing to be counted as a member of the black movements – a political activist. Being an Afrikaner had two expectations under the apartheid government – the use of a language and an expected political affiliation. Breytenbach defies both of these. We must then classify his writing as post-modern.
The use of Afrikaans, for many South Africans like Breytenbach, was the use of the language of the oppressor. The use of such a language had the purpose of empowering both the language and the people who used it. This is rather ironic, because if one takes Breytenbach’s political views into account, one would assume that he would shy away from the use of Afrikaans. He does not do this at all – the bulk of his work is, in fact, written in Afrikaans. He said that he took refuge in the use of his own language. “There’s always another language behind the present one …” (1984: 28). At the end of the novel he includes a collection of thirteen poems that were written in prison. These will not be examined here because they were originally written in Afrikaans. The use of a language must thus be considered a political statement. After his release and arrival in France, a Dutch journalist interviewed Breytenbach. He said, “he would never again write in Afrikaans which was the language of the oppressor” (Rubin 1986: 48). For Breytenbach at this stage, “to be an Afrikaner is a political definition” (1984: 322). The above discussion once again emphasizes the importance of Breytenbach as a political prisoner in terms of explaining the differences and developments found in such a comparative examination.

Another important difference in the work of Breytenbach is the inclusion of the mythological when compared to that of Bosman and prison literature as a whole. The novel makes reference to the mythological history of flight: Breytenbach mentions the story of Icarus and how he tried to fly but failed. The use of myth and legend is also a facet of writing that is particular to Breytenbach’s prison account.

This analysis cannot take account of every difference and similarity found in the writings of the prison-authors under examination, just as it cannot include a comparative analysis of all South African prison literature. Thus those differences included represent some of the most unique aspects of each individual author’s writing. The similarities do not focus on unique areas, but rather on the fact that there are so many similar characteristics to be found in such a comparative analysis – at times too many to mention.
Like Bosman, Breytenbach firmly puts his mark on the world of prison literature in the writing of *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*. It “is such a telling example of the genre in South Africa precisely because of the particular intersection of cultural, political, and intellectual forms of consciousness which constitute the albino terrorist of the title” (Schalkwyk 1994: 25). Even though it has been suggested by many critics that Breytenbach has committed worse treason by living in Europe and writing in English rather than living in South Africa and writing in Afrikaans, this novel has achieved international acclaim. For Breytenbach, “South Africa is both heaven and hell, compulsive and repulsive, a country where he cannot live but which he cannot really leave” (Gready 1993: 508).

What do we learn from Breytenbach’s book that is different from all of the other political and prison accounts? Bosman introduces South African readers to the concept of local prison literature and gives them an understanding of day-to-day prison life in early twentieth-century South Africa, with few gruesome or unpalatable details, while Breytenbach becomes more detailed and descriptive in his account. This pattern is continued in *Bandiet*, by Hugh Lewin, which I believe to be remarkable simply as a result of the grotesque and crude manner in which he writes of his prison experience.

**Bandiet – Hugh Lewin**

Hugh Lewin wrote about his prison experience in the novel *Bandiet*, which was first published in London in the 1974. This novel remained banned in South Africa for several years, but a censored edition was finally published in South Africa in 1989. A new edition of the novel was recently released in South Africa, containing the full original text and including previously unpublished prison poems and stories.

Hugh Lewin was born in 1939 in Lydenburg, in Mpumalanga. He graduated from Rhodes University and began his career as a journalist. He
was involved in the African resistance movement and was arrested in 1966. He was charged under the Sabotage Act and sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment for attempting to sabotage the apartheid government. Upon his release he spent many years in exile in both London and Zimbabwe and eventually returned to South Africa in 1992.

In terms of literary form, *Bandiet* is far easier to examine than *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* simply because it is broken up into ten distinctive chapters. Each has a title directly related to the actual content of the chapter. Lewin begins relating his prison experience by recalling the statement he made at his trial in 1964. The first chapter, entitled “Arrest and Interrogation”, deals precisely with that. Lewin contextualizes his arrest by taking the reader back to the time in his life just prior to his arrest. This chapter introduces some of the men who later turn out to be the most violent interrogators. Lewin spends many pages detailing some of the interrogations to which he was subjected.

Chapter Two finds Lewin in Pretoria local prison, spending time in solitary confinement. He describes his arrival, and the first physical hostile space that he encounters: “the cell was rather like an upended shoe-box” (2002: 31). This chapter ends with Lewin’s trial and sentencing. In Chapter Three he officially starts his prison term; he is now officially a ‘bandiet’. Initially he is put into the observation block and is slowly introduced into prison routine. The reader is introduced to some of the political background of the South African prison system. Chapter Four finds Lewin being moved to Pretoria Central Prison (where Bosman was held). Lewin discusses the new routine, introduces some of the ‘local’ prison jargon and, most importantly, mentions the fact that he is now in a ‘hanging jail’. This leads him to his next chapter, which is aptly entitled “Hanging.” This particular chapter explores the atrocities and horrors of execution. It illustrates the statement made by Foucault that execution is the most extreme form of bodily punishment in existence.
Chapter Six, entitled “Sex”, is an unusual chapter on the relationships, sexual and otherwise, that begin in prison. Homosexual relations are rife. Bosman encounters such relations when a fellow inmate, Pym, shows an interest in him. Lewin, however, is the only prison-author to devote an entire chapter to this facet of prison life. The next chapter takes the reader into the hostile world controlled by those to whom he refers to as ‘Narks.’ Lewin mainly discusses the educational opportunities available to the prisoner. Chapter Eight tells of Lewin’s return from the central to the local prison. He provides a day-to-day account of the ongoing battle the prisoners had with a warden named Du Preez. Chapter Nine discusses Lewin’s first Christmas in prison and the fact that the prisoners were allowed to produce a play to celebrate the occasion. The chapter continues with detailing other plays that the prisoners produced, and ends with the banning of plays by the prison authorities.

The final chapter begins with the daily routine of being inspected. As in most of the other chapters, intimate details of prison authorities and prisoners are given. Lewin painstakingly describes how each character fits into his prison experience and how each action falls into the governing political system. He details the daily routine of prison, and ends the chapter with the ultimate climax – his release.

Although Chapter Ten marks the completion of the novel, the 2002 edition includes a section on Lewin’s life after his release, some of his prison poetry as well as stories that were previously unpublished.

There are the expected similarities between Lewin and Bosman. Lewin too makes use of the prison slang that he encountered in prison. There is terminology in this novel that is also very similar to that in True Confessions.

Another similarity between this and other prison literature is the constant awareness of death. Like Bosman, Lewin was in a “hanging jail” and he found that to be a terrifying experience. Unlike Bosman, he writes directly about his fears and his sadness that death constantly surrounds him.
They were there [the condemned]. It was like living with a murdered man permanently in the front room of your home: you have to pass the corpse every day, you have to work around it, you have to sweep under it and dust over it, you have to live with it … This was the most terrifying thing about Central, the hanging jail. (2002: 113)

Lewin’s fears and sadness are indirectly implied through his inclusion of this facet of prison life into his novel. With the constant threat of death hanging in the prison like a bad smell, came the singing of the condemned. Bosman introduces the importance of singing in *Cold Stone Jug*. He shows how it gives hope and provides comfort. This is also demonstrated in *Bandiet* and much of all the prison writing that followed.

The list of common characteristics that can be found in *Cold Stone Jug* and *Bandiet*, and *Bandiet* and *True Confessions* is fairly extensive. But the purpose of this comparative analysis is not to provide exhaustive listings, but rather to show that similarities and differences can be found in the literature under examination. It is important to note how Foucault’s pronouncements, as discussed in Chapter Four, are useful as a lens through which to read Lewin’s account.

Lewin’s detailed discussion of the actual prisons is also important to note. In Chapter Four he spends a great deal of time describing Pretoria Central Prison and the prison cells therein. This provides the binding factor of all prison literature – the hostile space in which the prison-authors were imprisoned.

This novel is unique by virtue of the gruesome way in which Lewin records his prison experience. This factor alone justifies its inclusion in this study, which attempts to take in the widest possible selection of South African prison literature. Unlike Bosman, Breytenbach and many of the other prison authors, Lewin did not hold back on describing the methods of torture that were used by the South African Security branch and other prison officials: “You’re going to talk tonight. No jokes tonight, Lewin. You’ll shit yourself tonight . . . . Tonight you’ll die” (2002: 23). Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes in the foreword of the novel that some readers might feel that Lewin is exaggerating when describing the methods of the police
and the torture to which both he and his fellow inmates were subjected, but enough evidence has been given to the contrary. This has been adequately illustrated in the findings of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Gready substantiates this by saying that, for political prisoners, “conditions of imprisonment were deliberately severe … they were the lowest, least privileged members of prison society…” (1993: 512). Lewin suggests that, as a result of the prison conditions experienced by political prisoners, one could compare life in prison to the lives of the oppressed sections of the population in apartheid South Africa. This mirroring of prison with life ‘outside’ is a unique facet that Lewin introduces into prison literature. He says that by being a political prisoner one is forced to become a member of an underclass. “To become part of an underclass – ‘become’ black, learn to live with such acute forms of official violence – facilitated yet another form of oppositional narrative. It became possible to articulate a vision of South Africa through the experience of imprisonment” (Gready 1993: 515). This remark, referring to Lewin’s sentiments, ties in directly with the tone in which he wrote Bandiet. Although the details are vivid and gruesome, Lewin did not resort to the bitter, sarcastic and sardonic tones of Bosman and Breytenbach. The fact that Lewin, and most other political prisoners, writes about the vicious interrogation and torture to which he was subjected not only shows a difference in the writings, but a development too. This development can be directly attributed to the fact that these prison-authors were incarcerated for political crimes and it was typical for a political prisoner to be tortured. As resistance to apartheid strengthened, so did the punitive measures taken by the governments against the resister. Thus we must expect some development in the literature as each new decade brought more atrocity and cruelty to the prisons and the prisoners, especially to those imprisoned for political crimes.

Some critics believe that the honest and very emotional voice of Lewin that is manifested in his writing is different to that of his contemporaries and therefore should be taken note of:
Walking into prison is like walking into a butcher’s fridge, empty. It is cold … essentials only. You are stripped of everything inessential. They strip you at the beginning and they go on stripping you, endlessly, to ensure that you have only what they think is necessary. You are stripped bare of everything you can call your own, constantly stripped bare of anything that you make your own. (2002: 29)

His honesty is brutal, yet from the heart, and where Breytenbach was sarcastic and bitter, “Lewin went through sheer hell and emerged, not devastated, not broken, and not consumed with bitterness or a lust for revenge” (Tutu in Bandiet 2002: vii). Lewin even goes so far as to say that life for a white political prisoner is not bad at all when compared with the lives of the black political prisoners who were on Robben Island.

*Bandiet* is not a deeply introspective book, “but perhaps because it is written for all Lewin’s fellow-prisoners, some of whom are still there, two indeed for life, it concentrates more on the objective life of a political prisoner, from arrest to interrogation to beating-up and solitary, trial and then seven years in various prisons” (Driver 1975: 116). The gentle tone is a unique quality of the novel. This too is an aspect of writing typical to Lewin as an individual rather than to prison-authors as a whole. A possible reason for the more gentle, humane quality of his writing is that Lewin was fortunate enough to spend very little time in solitary confinement. He found himself in and with a group of fellow political prisoners for most of his incarceration. A group ethic would have made him especially aware of others. This points to another difference that leads to a development in this literature. Bosman would not have experienced the same group ethics. Associating with prisoners who not only share a physical hostile space, but also a deep spirit of resistance, would result in an incomparable sense of solidarity being formed. This is another example of the way in which the political context gives rise to a difference and development in the literature.

The final difference to be noted between this prison account and the two already discussed is that it can be argued that one of Lewin’s motives for writing this novel was in protest at capital punishment. In no way have either Bosman or Breytenbach indicated that their writing is to be considered protest literature. Although this was just one reason for Lewin’s
writing, it brings with it a whole new dimension to prison literature. This and the other aspects already discussed together form the main differences between Lewin’s prison writing and that of Bosman, Breytenbach and other prison-authors. Although Bosman and Breytenbach were also ‘protesting’, the difference is that they did not explicitly signal this.

I have claimed throughout this study that examples of prison literature have been selected with the purpose of including the widest possible range of prison literature. It is vital, therefore, to make mention (however brief), of Albie Sachs’s *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (1966) which is an important piece of prison literature, quite unlike any other. Sachs writes his prison experience in what he terms a diary, which takes the form of a novel and was later transformed into a play. Thus one can immediately pick up the uniqueness of this writing. Bosman wrote a novel, which is generally considered as being semi-autobiographical in nature. Breytenbach wrote a novel in the form of a memoir, while Sachs wrote a novel as a diary. It is because of this movement between genres that I have included *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* in Chapter Eight, where diaries and other genres are examined.

These novels are examples of what I believe should be termed prison ‘classics.’ The contribution that these authors have made to South African prison literature is inestimable. Schalkwyk argues that “even in the case of writers who are close to each other in terms of race, culture, political stance, and time and place of imprisonment, it is a mistake to project homogeneity into South African prison writing” (1994: 24). Thus South African prison literature is a literature of paradox – so many similar characteristics juxtaposed against all the glaring contrasts. It is paradoxical in terms of the literature as a whole but also individually within each novel. The contrasts exist between death and life, freedom and imprisonment, light and dark. This is true not only of the prison novel, but of prison poetry too.
CHAPTER SEVEN

PRISON POETRY

Poetry written in prison or by prisoners about their personal prison experiences falls squarely within the purview of this study. So different from the genre of writing examined in the previous chapter, poetry has usefully been defined in *The New Oxford Illustrated Dictionary* as the “art, work of the poet; expression of beautiful or elevated thought, imagination, or feeling in appropriate language and usually in metrical form” (1978: 1300). The poets included in this chapter are Dennis Brutus, Jeremy Cronin and, to a lesser extent, Hugh Lewin. The discussion will show how, despite the fact that it has obvious and profound generic differences from the novel, prison poetry can be seen to contain many of the features exemplified in Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug* – and this is especially so when it is read through a Foucauldian lens.

Before looking at the poetry of the individual prison poets, it is necessary to examine the differences between the prison novel and the prison poem. As with all the literature examined in this study, the poems discussed here must be about prison experience. Perhaps the most important difference between the prison poem and the prison novel is simply a consequence of genre: *prison poetry tends to express more personal emotion than does the prison novel*. Clearly, poetry by its very nature is more suited to capturing the intensely personal, emotional moment, and this is demonstrated in the poems examined here.

The second important distinction is *mode of address* – or intended audience. By its very nature, the novel tends to have a more ‘public’ address; this is unusual in the case of poetry, and particularly prison poetry. Indeed, one often finds that the prison poet is writing with a particular individual in mind, rather than a generalized mass audience. When these poets were writing to their wives or sisters, they knew the audience for
whom they were writing on a personal level, and so immediately the tone of the writing would be a personal one. A personal voice would instantly create a more intimate atmosphere for the reader, in contrast with the detachment that often prevails in the narration of a novel.

Another major difference in terms of the content of the poem and the novel is the lack of detailed historicity in the poem. Many of the prison-novelists include a large portion of the historical background both to their incarceration and to the prison in which they themselves were held. The prison poet, on the other hand, does not. The few instances where one might find a historical reference in a prison poem would take the form of a brief reference to a particular law or historical figure of the time. These references are usually no longer than one or two lines. Nonetheless, the fact that mention is made of laws and historical figures (no matter how briefly) illustrates that prison poetry shares the attribute of historical content with Cold Stone Jug and the prison novels that have followed.

A further difference between prison poetry and the prison novel is scale or scope. The prison novelist is able to capture large parts of his entire prison experience in his writing while, clearly, the prison poet cannot. Prison poems generally deal with a minuscule aspect or moment of prison life. The poet could write about a visit, or a meal, but a wider scale or scope is beyond the range of modern poetry. Post-Romantic poetry in English – and certainly poetry of the twentieth century – is almost always uniformly confined to the short lyric, or cycle of lyrics. One would not therefore encounter a poem that captures much of a prisoner’s term in prison.

However, the fact that the poet deals with small, private moments enables him to bring a greater intensity of vision to bear on his subject matter. The novelist might very well refer to an incident such as a meal in prison and even go so far as to express his personal opinions about the meal. But because the novelist is trying to capture the significant parts of his prison experience in his novel in larger narrative swathes, it is virtually impossible to include such moments of personal intensity. The prison poet would be
continually aware of space constraints in terms of the length of his poem. Although there is no fixed limit in terms of how long a poem may be, a poet knows that he has to say what he wants to as powerfully and as succinctly as possible. The novelist, on the other hand, has no such constraints. To add an extra ten pages can do no harm, but for the poet to do the same might result in the effectiveness and the meaning of the poem being lost entirely.

There are, however, a number of similarities between prison poetry and the prison novel. In terms of *diction*, or linguistic style, the prison poet uses much of the prison argot that is found so abundantly in *Cold Stone Jug*. The *themes* that the poet writes about can be found in the novels too and ultimately can be tied in with the themes that are found in *Cold Stone Jug*. This chapter will show how poets like Cronin and Brutus include the major themes of death, time and loss of self-identity.

The use of the *first person* is also something that prison poetry shares with the prison novel, although, clearly, the generic particularities of narrative in the case of the novel and the private poetic voice mean that there are as many differences in ‘narrative voice’ as similarities.

Above all, the *hostile space* in and about which the prison poet writes is entirely comparable to that of the novelist’s hostile space. As a result we can read prison poetry through the same lens as deployed in Chapter Four of this study.

The question that we are left with, however, is why a prison-author would write a poem rather than a novel. Surely if a prisoner is trying to find a voice, to tell a story, then a novel would be the ideal vehicle to use? Ioan Davies too questions the choice of using poetry in order to share something as important as a prison experience. He asks,

> why bother to write, especially poetry …. In many ways we can understand the political [prison] writer …. But poetry? I don’t think we can answer this purely out of the poetry, because the poetry is the inscription on the wall, the voice of the hopeless, the graffiti of the angry, the echo that catches the sensibility from outside. Is it true that all we can do with poetry is to let it speak to us out of the cavernous recesses as long as we want to know more? (1990: 150)

He goes on to say that in order to listen to a voice we have to know which occasion brought us to the listening. In this case we are listening to
the voice of a prisoner whose imprisonment brought about the listening. In this case, the incarceration and brutal treatment of humans is the occasion that brought us to the listening of this particular type of poetry – prison poetry. Thus we must conclude that these writers choose poetry as a vehicle to bring across their prison experiences simply out of personal preference for the genre rather than as any symbolic deep-rooted result of their imprisonment. The point of the prison novel is to render, in realistic terms, the details about prison life that would engender a feeling of abhorrence in the reader. So, the prison novel becomes a way of registering a kind of social protest. Davies asks as to whether or not there is a point to prison poetry. What can prison poetry do, uniquely, as a genre? Apart from giving expression to a private utterance (where the novel tends to focus on protest for the masses), prison poetry emphasizes the heightened emotion of the prison experience through quickly creating a climax and reaction in the reader. The horror of prison life detailed in a novel is just as severe in a prison poem. Therefore the prison poem gives ‘voice’ to a prison experience fair more speedily than a novel.

DENNIS BRUTUS

Dennis Brutus was known as the ‘singing voice’ of the South African Liberation Movement. He was born in 1924 in Zimbabwe of South African parentage. After completing his studies at the University of the Witwatersrand he taught for fourteen years in South African high schools. The political campaigns in which he was involved led to him being banned from all social and political activity in South Africa and it was when he was trying to escape his ban by attending an Olympic meeting in Europe in 1963 that he was arrested. He was sentenced to eighteen months’ hard labour and was held captive on Robben Island with Nelson Mandela. Upon his release he left for London, which was his home until he became a political refugee
in the United States in 1983 where he is still living today (www.ustawi.org/dennis.htm).

Brutus’s work has generally been received as recording his heartfelt protest at the inhumane treatment accorded the enemies of apartheid while still reserving a space for the private voice and the well-turned poetic utterance. In achieving this he appears to combine the ‘function’ of the prison novel (registering a protest) with that of prison poetry (giving expression to the private utterance). He records his misery and loneliness as a political prisoner but combines tenderness with his anger. Because of the tone in which Brutus chose to write, he was often criticized as not being a true protest writer, but, rather, a traditionalist. Brutus, however, still considers himself as being an activist constantly interested in social justice. In an interview conducted by Kevin Goddard in 1991, Brutus said that when he was writing his poetry, “one of the things I did was to describe a situation, without protesting against it, and allow the reader to make up his mind whether it was a reprehensible situation which he or she would feel impelled to protest against” (Goddard and Wessels 1992: 69). If this statement is true, then Brutus’s poetry is of great value to the student of prison literature because one will find a more dispassionate objective account of his prison experience. This does not imply that a student of prison literature is searching for factual knowledge about prison life which sociological and historical accounts can best provide, but emphasizes another remarkable difference in the depiction of prison life, a difference that warrants the inclusion of Brutus’s poetry in this study. Amuta has remarked as follows about Brutus’s poetry (with specific reference to that in Stubborn Hope): “In individual poems, no single emotion is allowed such dominance as to overwhelm the audience in an undirectional empathy. Hope is counterposed to despair, courage to cowardice, tenderness to violence, freedom to unfreedom, love to hatred, justice to injustice and beauty to ugliness” (1989: 185). This is another of the reasons why Brutus’s poetry is unique in terms of other prison literature and is included in this
study. It has already been shown how novelists like Breytenbach and Lewin were entirely concerned with self in the writing of their prison experience. Brutus is not coldly impartial, but at all times attempts to keep his personal feelings under control to avoid portraying a one-sided, hysterical view of his prison experience.

The ‘emotion’ referred to here is not his personal feelings during his imprisonment, but rather, his feelings towards those who imprisoned him and the political system in which he found himself. His prison poems are extremely personal and written from the heart because he writes primarily about himself, his private thoughts, emotions and ideas. Because Brutus’s poetry is deeply personal, it automatically adheres to the two key criteria used in this study to define prison literature – it is written by a prison-author about his personal experience.

Prison was a theme in Brutus’s poetry before he was actually imprisoned. Brutus hated the oppression that was brought in by the apartheid regime and referred to South Africa in one of his early poems as “my prison country.” Beyond this one reference, this early poetry does not bear upon the themes of the study (and is therefore not further discussed here), but it is interesting to note Brutus’s early awareness of imprisonment and freedom.

The best-known instance of prison poetry by Brutus is his Letters to Martha, first published in 1969. This collection of poems records Brutus’s experiences of his time as a political prisoner. The first version of Letters to Martha included some of Brutus’s earlier work, and this caused some confusion in terms of the classification of his poetry. His prison poems were reprinted in A Simple Lust (1989) in the second section entitled “Letters to Martha And Poems about Prison.” However, Driver says that, despite the frequent criticism of Brutus’s poetry, the poems he writes in jail “strike me as very fine indeed … [they] come close to the true voice of feeling” (1975: 114). No matter what the personal views are on this poetry, the focus of this thesis is examine the similarities and the differences in this literature and
thus the personal views of various critics will not be taken into account. The use of literary criticism in this thesis is focused on content rather than opinion.

These poems were written to his sister-in-law, and recounted his prison experience to her. Brutus had been banned from writing or publishing as a result of his political affiliations and found a means to sidestep the ban by writing these ‘letters.’ Nkondo suggests that the letters are actually love poems to Martha more than pure evocations of prison experience. “They are lyrics that contrive to say, if not absolute truths, at least those intensely witty, unforgettably beautiful things that tremble on the lips of all persons in love” (1979: 216). This demonstrates how cross-generic prison literature is, and how difficult it is to define. The discussion to follow examines various prison poems written by Brutus. Each poem shows many of the characteristics of prison literature originally found in *Cold Stone Jug*. The selection of poems in this chapter has been made to show as many of these common characteristics as possible as well as each poet’s unique style.

Brutus conceives of prison not only in terms of his own actual physical imprisonment, but also within the context of his metaphysics – his personal concept of space, being and identity. The fact that Brutus was a fighter for freedom makes it easier for him to write about prison. In highlighting the tragedy of being imprisoned, Brutus makes the reader more aware of the state of freedom – whether of the body or the mind. It has been suggested throughout this study that, in writing about their prison experience, these authors, while having a heightened awareness of being on the inside and therefore losing their freedom, wanted their writing to send a strong message – at times political – to those on the outside. As the message changes from personal to political, so a development in prison literature can be noted; one directly related to the increasing politicization of the country. Brutus recognizes the fact that even though he is ‘locked up’; he still has freedom of the mind, a vital aspect in the life of a poet (or any thinking
person, for that matter). We see this in the following excerpt from *A Simple Lust* (1989: 80–81):

> It is not all terror and deprivation, you know;

> one comes to welcome the closer contact and understanding one achieves with one’s fellow-men, fellows, compeers;

> and the discipline does much to force a shape and pattern on one’s daily life as well as on the days

> and honest toil offers some redeeming hours for the wasted years;

> so there are times when the mind is bright and restful though alive; rather like the full calm morning sea.

Brutus writes with such emotion that one can see that he truly believes in the cause for which he fights and that by not turning to anger and bitterness he is able to continue both as an individual within himself and as a fighter for freedom. This can be compared to the attitude taken by Albie Sachs in *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (examined in the next chapter). In writing in this tone, Brutus introduces the theme of beauty in solitude. It is in this solitude that he is able to dwell upon and appreciate aspects of life such as love (possibly for Martha, as was suggested earlier) and self-realization. This is quite unexpected in prison writing, thus making his poetry unique and even more important for a study such as this. Nkondo states that the cumulative image of Brutus as both a poet and a prisoner can be seen in his poems: “The exaltation of the revolutionary who indicts society as a prison and himself becomes the hero of a double drama of fall
and redemption, pride in any punishment under the dual aegis of Prometheus-Lucifer” (1979: 215).

The following poem illustrates Brutus’s initial reaction to his jail sentence. Folli (1994: 84) suggests that that he experiences “paradoxical emotion”:

After the sentence
mingled feelings:  
sick relief,
the load of approaching days
apprehension –
the hints of brutality
have a depth of personal meaning;

exultation –
the sense of challenge,
of confrontation,
vague heroism
mixed with self-pity
and tempered by the knowledge of those
who endure much more
and endure. (Brutus 1989: 54)

This excerpt from A Simple Lust simply entitled “After the Sentence”, written fairly early on in his imprisonment, shows how Brutus shares his personal emotions in his poetry, but there is no evidence of either protest or bitterness. We see this in his use of emotive language in the word “relief”, “apprehension” and “exultation.” He shows that he is determined not to let his spirit be broken by the system that has imprisoned him but rather keep his mind alive, possibly through the act of writing poetry. Brutus was determined from the onset of his imprisonment that this experience would not be in vain. Folli suggests “this sense of righteous suffering gives meaning to his prison experience” (1994: 92). By giving meaning to an experience, Brutus’s poetry evinces an existentialist strain – a dominant feature in prison literature.

Brutus is completely aware of the world in which he exists and the role that he is to play. This is also a common thread in most prison literature –
an awareness of one’s own personal hostile space. Brutus becomes aware of trying to find a sense of meaning while in prison. This ties in with the fact that one often loses one’s identity while in prison so this constant search for meaning is often no more than a search for a sense of self.

Another poem in which he continues this thought pattern is “Cold”, which was written at Colesburg when he was en route to Robben Island.

the clammy cement
sucks our naked feet

a rheumy bulb
lights a damp grey wall…

steel ourselves into fortitude
or accept an image of ourselves
numb with resigned acceptance.

Apart from the emotion that is revealed in this poem, Brutus also provides a glimpse of prison life. He introduces the reader to the physical space in which he is forced to live and the diction that he uses to describe this space shows that it is very hostile. Many writers echo the words of this poem when describing their individual trips to Robben Island. The fact that others can substantiate what we read in the writing of Brutus suggests his truthfulness to his subject matter. This is important in terms of gaining valuable insights into prison experience – ones that would not be found in history textbooks. The poem continues:

the chains on our ankles
and wrists
that pair us together
jangle

glitter.

We begin to move
awkwardly.

Here Brutus suggests a loss of identity. This is yet another theme commonly found in prison literature, starting with Cold Stone Jug. Those
prisoners who had lost their sense of courage in this time of pain and adversity accepted a new image for themselves. This image was created by the prison system and the world ‘outside’, a stereotypical image of a prisoner – with all of the attendant connotations of criminality. In accepting this image, these prisoners were giving up their own identity. According to Gessler Nkondo, Brutus (like Bosman, Breytenbach and Lewin), is haunted by prison and it becomes for him an object of fear (1979: 204). Folli suggests that Brutus’s use the pronominal form ‘one’ is a technique that he used to show the sense of inhibition and fear engendered in himself by the apartheid regime (1994: 65). By using ‘one’, Brutus is separating his personal identity from that which is given to him as a prisoner, while at the same time suggesting that this is also a ‘common’ fate – that it will be meted out to anyone who dares to defy the apartheid regime. This distancing device is reminiscent of Bosman’s experiencing persona. Neither Bosman nor Brutus could accept or come to terms with the lack of identity forced upon them as prisoners. On some level, both these authors wanted to distance themselves from the image of the ‘stereotypical prisoner.’ They were petrified that in becoming a ‘prisoner’ that they would lose the little sense of self that remained within them. Therefore in writing about their prison experience they both avoided directly using the first person. When using the first person, the writer is placing himself fully into the role of prisoner as ‘I’, which is not the case in the more generic (and distant) use of ‘one.’

Like the novelists, many of the prison-poets write about the typical features of prison life. Bosman began this trend in writing about his meals, fellow inmates and the day-to-day routine in prison. This is also true of Brutus’s poetry. In his poetry we see evidence of cruel warders, an awareness of being separated from the outside world and characteristic prison diction. These common features can be seen in the following poem:

I remember one night
after midnight
and moving
through an impulse of loneliness
  to try and find the stars.

And through the haze
  the battens of fluorescents made
I saw pinpricks of white
  I thought were stars.

Greatly daring
  I thrust my arm through the bars
and easing the switch in the corridor
  plunged my cell in darkness

I scampered to the window
  and saw the splashes of light
where the stars flowered.

But through my delight
  thudded the anxious boots
and a warning barked
  from the machine-gun post
on the catwalk.

And it is the brusque inquiry
  and threat
that I remember of that night
  rather than the stars. (Brutus 1989: 67)

The fact that the warning was “barked” gives a clear indication of the
attitude of the prison warder and the relationship (or rather lack thereof) that
the warders had with the prisoners. The warder obviously feels nothing but
animosity for the prisoners and so the tone in which he speaks to them
would be indicative of such emotion.

All South African prison literature, right from the first publication of
*Cold Stone Jug* in 1949, shows how the prisoners are devastated by their
separation from the outside world. Brutus highlights this fact when he refers
to his “impulse of loneliness” and his desperate attempt to touch the stars.
By reaching the stars, he feels, he will be able to make contact with the
outside world.
Brutus’s poetry also includes typical prison imagery and symbolism. As shown in the discussion on novels, many of the prison-authors used symbols in their writing as a means by which to give expression to the new reality they encountered on the inside. The poem quoted above refers to stars. The religious iconography in Brutus’s poems takes the form of stars and all things astronomical. The symbolism of the stars and the way in which it ties in with religion are common themes in prison literature. Stars are stereotypically related to the heavens and direction, which in turn are related to things of a spiritual nature. All the senses are heightened when freedom is removed and thus the prison-authors, like their fellow inmates, experience a deep sense of spirituality that involves a search for something deeper than their mere physical existence.

Brutus’s overwhelming sense of being ‘inside’ is accompanied by a feeling of separation, not only from the outside physical world but from the spiritual world too. In the poem above, he is looking for the stars; he is reaching out and yet can never reach them. This suggests a deep sense of abandonment, even by the heavens and God. He mentions the Southern Cross in many of his poems. In an interview he stated that he felt totally deserted by God while in prison: “I think the use of the Southern Cross with a kind of religious overtone, a certain spirituality … but to be without grace, is being ungraceful. But to be without grace, which is something given to you ‘gratis’ by God, is a spiritual concept … forsaken by God” (Folli 1994: 68). In “Cold”, Brutus talks about being aware of the “frosty glitter of stars the Southern Cross…” “[F]rosty” suggests a break in the relationship with God: there is no warmth or comfort provided for Brutus. All of the above emotions heighten the sense of hostility that a prisoner would experience in jail. Other common symbols are birds, suggesting freedom, and the walls separating the ‘outside’ from those on the ‘inside.’

Another common feature of prison life that is found in most prison writing is the physical brutality to which the prisoners were subjected. This violent treatment was more often than not meted out to political prisoners.
As conditions changed in the country, so the levels of violence increased – as is depicted in the literature. Thus a development can be seen in terms of the violence to which political prisoners were subjected. This exposure to violence ties in with a constant awareness of death. At a lecture that he gave in Wisconsin, Brutus describes the physical violence in terms of sexual assault. “Prisoners were starved into submission, beaten if necessary, then, when on the point of consent to homosexuality, left alone without food or water, though with an occasional beating. Most then found themselves begging for sexual assault in order to get food and water” (Goodwin 1982: 13).

Laughing
khaki-ed, uniformed, with his foot on the neck of the convict who had fallen,
holding his head under water in the pool where he had fallen,
fallen
while the man thrashed helplessly
and the bubbles gurgled
and the air glinted dully on lethal gunbutts,
and the day was brilliant with the threat of death.
(Brutus 1989: 59)

Here Brutus is referring to the actions of one of the prison warders with whom he came into contact on Robben Island. The brutality of this particular warder’s actions is clearly illustrated in this poem. The word “lethal” introduces the reader to the awareness of death, and it is strengthened by the direct mention of the “threat of death.” This is stated in “Postscripts”, where he refers to the “awareness of the proximity of death.” What is interesting to note, and further substantiates the point made earlier, is the fact that there is no evidence of a tone of bitterness or hatred towards the warder. Brutus merely records the events as they happen. Any glimpse of emotion that is given to the reader is pity for the victim and fear on the part of the observer. This is true of much of Brutus’s prison poetry: he is constantly aware of the suffering of others. This fellow-feeling is common to prison literature: the prisoners become conscious of all those around
them, whether these people be fellow inmates, warders, doctors or government officials.

Many prison writers talk of their fellow inmates with compassion and concern. Writers like Brutus and Lewin refer to these prisoners in the writings that they produced after their release. They are aware of those whom they have left behind and the fate that could befall them. Brutus’s humanism extended not only to his fellow prisoners but to those on the outside too. This could be part of the reason that there always seems to be a positive note, however small, in his *Letters to Martha*. Brutus was greatly concerned about his family and friends, who were not kept informed of his whereabouts or his state of being.

The not knowing is perhaps the worst part of the agony for those outside. (Brutus 1989(a): 59)

This humanitarian awareness is common among prisoners and can be seen in other prison writing too. With a heightened sense of self-awareness must come a sense of awareness of others. Many of the prison-authors spent a great deal of time in solitary confinement, where the only thing they could do was to think. (As we shall see, this was certainly true in the case of Albie Sachs, who spent all of his time in prison in solitary confinement.) Being educated men, for the most part, they realized that in order to stay sane, they had to keep their minds active; otherwise they would be defeated by the very system they were fighting against. By not keeping their minds active, there was a strong possibility of going insane, as Bosman and Breytenbach realize. Thus, in order to remain sane, the prisoners forced themselves to think – these thoughts would be self-reflexive and about others, too, whether fellow prisoners or family and friends.

Above all, Brutus, like Lewin, Breytenbach, Cronin and many other prison writers, expresses a spirit of resistance in his writing, which was after all the reason for his imprisonment in the first place. Once again, it must be pointed out that even though Bosman, the ‘father’ of prison literature, was
not a political prisoner, one can see resistance in *Cold Stone Jug*, whether resistance to the onset of insanity or a homosexual encounter, or, perhaps more pervasively, to the idea that human beings should be locked away in a soul-crushing environment, a spirit of resistance is palpable nonetheless. The spirit of resistance found in the writings of political prison-authors vacillates over time. Contemporary prison-authors are far more open about their resistance and protest than authors like Breytenbach, Lewin or Brutus were. Once again we must note these differences, which in turn suggest an important development in this literature that comes as a direct result of the increasing levels of resistance within South Africa because of the increased brutality of apartheid and all the policies that were put in place.

The fact that Brutus’s prison poetry can be classed as resistance writing once again shows the continual crossover of genres. For Barbara Harlow, these writings, especially those written by political detainees, are “collective documents, testimonies written by individuals to their common struggle. These writings are to be distinguished from conventional autobiography, because they are actively engaged in a re-definition of the self and the individual in terms of a collective enterprise and struggle” (1987: 120). Harlow’s repetition of the word “struggle” emphasizes the fact that prison writing is, to a large extent, resistance writing.

In writing *Letters to Martha*, Brutus not only continued using the framework for prison literature as found in *Cold Stone Jug*, but also brought in his own unique aspects. This pattern is continued in the poetry of Jeremy Cronin.
Cronin was born in 1949, the son of a South African naval officer. He spent most of his childhood in Simonstown and moved to Rondebosch after the death of his father. He started his tertiary education at the University of Cape Town and continued studying in Paris. On his return to South Africa, he lectured in Philosophy and Political Science. He was arrested in 1976 and charged under the Terrorism Act for carrying out underground work for the ANC. He was sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment. Upon sentencing the judge said: “so far as you are concerned, Cronin, I get the impression from the political statement that you made from the dock yesterday that you are quite unrepentant. I do not suppose that the prison sentence that I am going to give you is going to reform you” (http://web.uct.ac.za). He spent his prison years in various prisons in Pretoria. While he was serving his time, his wife died unexpectedly. Cronin still lives in South Africa and serves as the deputy general-secretary for the South African Communist Party. His best-known prison poetry is published in the collection of poetry entitled Inside (http://web.uct.ac.za).

Inside was launched on 1 February 1984, exactly nine months after his release from prison. Cronin was not allowed to write in prison unless he submitted the poems to the authorities, which he was not prepared to do. Censorship was a generally inhibiting factor in literary expression and of this Cronin was aware. He was thus forced to disguise some of his poetry in his letters and memorized the rest by performing them for his fellow inmates. He was able to smuggle out about fifty percent of Inside. Cronin classifies these poems as autobiographical in nature. In an interview with Stephen Gray, he stated that the title of his collection of prison poetry serves a double purpose: firstly it highlights the obvious – the fact that he was imprisoned and these poems deal with his imprisonment; and secondly it is a collection about “inner states” (1984: 35). In the same interview,
Cronin says that, “one of the central themes of Inside is just how dependent one is on others for being a human being” (35).

Cronin’s poetry is simple and accessible – suggesting, perhaps, that he wrote his poems for a wider audience than the literary cognoscenti. According to Folli, “like Brutus who aims to write for a wider audience and principally ‘for the people of my own continent’, Cronin wishes to make contact with the majority of people in South Africa” (Folli 1994: 100). Cronin was seeking a “common voice” (Chapman 1996: 420). He writes in protest: “his words, he says, are words for the voiceless” (Folli 1994: 95). Thus we are made aware of a major difference developing in terms of the nature of the utterances of prison-authors. Bosman’s focus was private, while later, more and more, political prison-authors were searching for a public focus. The loss of freedom for a prison-author is synonymous with the loss of ‘voice.’ This loss is cited by the prison-authors as one of the more important reasons for the writing of prison literature.

One must always consider the context in which prison poetry is written. Brutus was imprisoned in 1963, while Cronin spent time in prison from 1976. This means that because Cronin was imprisoned later than his contemporaries in terms of this collection of literature, he had the opportunity to read the writings of Brutus, Bosman and Breytenbach before writing his own. Cronin himself says there are “tinges of Bosman in, say, Breytenbach … also to an extent in … Bandiet … I certainly read Brutus attentively before I went in, and had remembered his poems … I was aware of following in his footsteps. [From Brutus I] learnt that one could write an extended book of lyrical poetry out of prison experience … if Lewin could have wrung words from the stone and concrete then so could I” (Folli 1994: 99). This quotation, in itself, substantiates one of the principal arguments of this study – Herman Charles Bosman can legitimately be regarded as the ‘father’ and founder of South African prison literature, a body of writing that can now be recognized as such.
A similarity between the poetry of Cronin and that of Brutus is the fact that Cronin does not concentrate on the theme of victimization in his writing. Cronin is far more interested in humanity and affirming his own existence than in concentrating on death and the treatment of the prisoners in jail. It is not fair to say that he excludes these topics from his writing altogether: these are everyday occurrences in the life of an inmate and are noteworthy; however, and they do not become his reason for writing.

Similarities that are common to the writing of Cronin and other prison-authors, especially Herman Charles Bosman, will now be examined in detail. Cronin, like most political prisoners, wrote to affirm his political allegiances. He believed that his time in prison created a bond between himself and all those South Africans who were suffering under the apartheid government. Lewin, Sachs and Brutus show the development of this awareness and bond in their own prison writings.

But my love
   to be removed
   jailed endorsed out banished
   man from woman is

After all
   nothing unusual in this

   Our country, in these times
   in this night full of crickets
   when to say plainly:

   ‘I love you’
   is also
   a small act
   of solidarity with all the others. (Cronin 1983: 68)

In its search for meaning in his imprisonment, which can be seen in the poetry, Cronin’s writing can be seen to be existentialist in nature. Brutus clearly states from the time of his arrest that he too would find meaning in his time in jail. As was argued in Chapter Three, existentialism can be seen as a common aspect to prison literature, starting with *Cold Stone Jug*. 
Cronin’s political allegiance can be found in the titles of his poems. One title that particularly illustrates this is “Motho ke Motho ka Batho Babang.” This literally means ‘a person is a person because of other people.’ The use of an African language in the title of such a poem is a clear attempt at creating a voice for a common audience, while emphasizing the freedom for all for which he was fighting. (It must also have been extremely provocative to any staunch supporter of the apartheid regime.) This must be considered a remarkable change in terms of the diction used in prison literature – while nonetheless still being a part of the framework created by Bosman. Prison jargon that began with the use of everyday English or Afrikaans diction, given new meaning, now develops and through this development begins to include African languages too. As the political prisoners became more involved in the fight against apartheid, so they would come into intimate contact with other races, hence the inclusion of African languages. This development in prison jargon definitely ties in with the development of apartheid in South Africa. as the discriminatory laws were tightened so the relationships, between those being discriminated against and white South Africans fighting for the cause, would strengthen.

Cronin’s work is clearly intensely autobiographical – a feature common to all prison writing. He writes about actual prisoners who did exist. Unlike some of Bosman’s characters, most of those mentioned in Cronin’s poetry can be traced. He writes about ‘real’ people and the prison experience he shared with them. Moreover, the places that are mentioned in his poetry also exist. But, more importantly, he writes to and about his wife. “In fact, Cronin categorically asserts that his poetry is autobiographical: by and large it’s certainly me” (Folli 1994: 95). This begs the question as to whether or not personal lyrics written under such duress and isolation really can be anything but autobiographical. These types of poems most certainly can be classed as autobiographical but are published in a collection, that when examined together, cannot be classified as such. Therefore it is the individual poem that is autobiographical, not the poet's entire collection of
prison poetry. In certain instances, certain poetry (or even a chapter in a novel or a specific diary entry) could quite easily be classified as autobiographical but we must keep in mind that this is only part of a whole, and it is the whole anthology, novel or diary that is under examination here.

Like other prison writers, Cronin is made aware of his identity while in prison. This awareness comes across in his poem, “4 Times 12”:

But you know
along this corridor we live
only in some ways
according to the same time
when we count other people’s victories for instance
as our own. (Cronin 1983: 23)

The fact that the prisoners would do this clearly shows how their sense of loss, especially in terms of a personal identity, makes them desperate to cling onto something that they can affirm as belonging to them. Folli claims that Cronin explodes the myth that “prison is a place in which one can discover some ‘authentic self’, voicing a fundamental truth … that man is interdependent in his very depths. He disintegrates in isolation, but flourishes through association” (1994: 96). It is this perception that produces another common reason for the writing of prison literature: the act of writing becomes something upon which the authors can depend. As already mentioned, it gives them a voice without which they would very possibly have disintegrated in their isolation. The very act of writing – of recording experiences and feelings in the hostile space of prison – presupposes agency, an active ‘I’ who seeks to make sense of his experience and in so doing affirm the continued (and purposeful) existence of the self.

Another important aspect of prison experience that can be seen in the poetry of Jeremy Cronin is that of time. For a prisoner, time becomes a focal point of his existence – whether it be the time that passes slowly on a day-to-day basis, or the time left in prison, or even the time that will pass between visits or letters from loved ones. This is a theme that is strongly
present in Cold Stone Jug and that continues throughout the corpus of prison literature. Although it may be considered as being self-evident – of course a prisoner is continually focused on time – it must be noted that it is common quality of all prison literature and a study such as this would be incomplete without reference to the importance of time, self-evident or not. Not so obvious, perhaps, is the fact that the perception of time is highly subjective: the passage of time in doing things of one’s own choice is very different from the passage of time in enforced incarceration. In the poem “4 Times 12”, Cronin gives expression to this notion:

But there are those other times
parceled
in separate
brown paper packets.
A time that walks in circles.
A time that flattens itself
incredibly thin
  disappears
into the backs of mirrors
or drips from the taps.
When I first came to jail
some of my comrades had served
thirteen years –
drop by drop, they’ve been inside now
since before the armed struggles
in Mozambique and Zimbabwe… (Cronin 1983: 23)

The words “drop by drop” emphasize the length of time spent in prison and how painfully slowly it goes by. Another reference to time is made in “For Comrades in Solitary Confinement” where Cronin asks “how-how-how long?” (25). In “Walking on Air”, Cronin tells the story of a fellow inmate, John Matthews. Matthews had been given the option of freedom if he decided to become a witness for the state. If he refused this offer, he would stay in prison. Together with his wife, Matthews decided that ‘time’ in prison was better than giving evidence to the state. He and his wife agree that “the lengthy incarceration is preferable to turning state witness. Without diminishing the painfulness of this personal choice, the poem
celebrates the exhilaration of personal and political commitment” (Schalkwyk 1994: 35).

The symbols used in poems can be compared to those in Brutus’s poetry. Symbolism in prison literature is part of the framework set up by Bosman, and continued in the poetry of Cronin. In “For Comrades in Solitary Confinement” he too uses the bird to symbolize freedom: “Every time they cage a bird / the sky shrinks” (25). By taking away the freedom of a human being, especially in the case of a political prisoner, Cronin believes that the world becomes a little less valuable.

In, “Poem-Shrike” (3), the first poem of Inside, Cronin writes about a shrike. This is a bird with a strong, hooked beak that preys on insects, mice and other small birds. “The poem is itself the shrike of the title: a bird constructed out of the pervasive scraps and labor of everyday prison life, it is finally launched, with a triumphant cry, into flight over the walls and into the reader’s world” (Schalkwyk 1994: 34). The fact that Cronin allows the bird the triumph of flying over the walls clearly indicates his state of mind. At this point he has not lost hope: hope of freedom and of things to come. Thus the bird is a positive symbol for Cronin. Folli looks at the bird from a different point of view and suggests that the shrike “is a metaphor of the body of poetry which must be launched ‘over the high walls’ if Cronin is to achieve his aim to make contact with those ‘outside’ … Cronin’s yearning for freedom and hunger for human contact is joyously expressed in the final shrill shriek as he launches his objective: sshrike!” (1994: 101). Folli’s interpretation is different from Schalkwyk’s but, nonetheless, the affirming quality in the image of the bird is maintained.

For a body I’ve rolled up
inventory item six two three: one pair
socks short prisoner’s European, dealt
for a tail
a tight hand from a scuffed
awaiting-trial playing card packs and added
50 finest quality
Rizla gummed
Cigarette blaadjies scorched black.
From a prison cell floor comes this barred light of your back, your beak was bent uptight for a week, your call with its inner-side scratch I’ve rasped, your eyes sharpened on the grindstone down in the prison workshop, then dipped in an old Koo tin of water from which they emerge dripping light nail sharp, tense, each as an i-dot. I check your hungry parts over again, longing by longing then out over the high walls I launch you now … sshrike! (Cronin 1983: 3)

Another symbol of freedom that can be found in Cronin’s poetry is the butterfly. Despite the claustrophobic life the prisoners are forced to lead, Cronin introduces an element of hope – the references to spring and the butterfly. The butterfly is not a symbol common in prison literature, but the theme of freedom is and thus Cronin uses the framework but adds his own ideas and images. He shows that he has not succumbed to a state of despair and hopelessness because of his awareness of life outside. The “struggle goes on” shows that he is aware of his personal reality in prison but he is not giving up on freedom.

Overhead is mesh To one side the morgue, To one side the gallows wing, this Is our yard

Into which a raggedy By happenstance Butterfly has flown,

Fluttering Halfway to panic Halfway to give a damn

Springtime has come. The years flow into each other.
The struggle goes on. (4)

Even though time seems endless for Cronin, he stills ‘gives a damn’, clearly indicating the fact that he has not yielded to a state of despondency.

An image that recurs in his poetry is that of the mirror. It is as though Cronin is trying to find some form of reality for himself by looking at reflections in a mirror. He may even be highlighting the lack of reality in prison. At times it seems as though he is trying to look ‘out’ from the ‘inside.’ Mirrors also create a sense of space and so Cronin could be attempting to enlarge his hostile space by using the image of the mirror in his writing. This is clear in the next poem where he holds the mirror outside of the cell, the hostile space in which he is supposed to live, thereby making all that he can see and experience ‘more.’

The image of the mirror is used in his poem entitled “Motho ke Motho ka Batho Babang”:

By holding a mirror out of the window I can 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 see
My face in the mirror. (26)

In this poem Cronin makes contact with another prisoner, albeit for a brief moment in time. The poem goes on to detail a ‘conversation’ between the two prisoners. This communication takes place in the form of sign language. This too is specific to prisoners. Cronin knew that the other prisoner was referring to warder when he (the other prisoner) bunches his fingers together in the shape of a badge and moves his hand to an “imaginary cap.” The most powerful communication which takes place is when the other prisoner wishes Cronin strength.
He turns his back to, now watch
His free hand, the talkative one,
Slips quietly behind

*Strength brother,* it says,
In my mirror,
A black fist. (18)

The symbol of strength shown to Cronin, the “black fist”, is specific to political prisoners. Bosman would not have had contact with prisoners of other races, let alone have such intimate and powerful communication with them. This fact not only illustrates a distinct difference in the literature, but a development in the communication found in prison too. Political prisoners were fighting for solidarity and unity among all races and so this development, communication between races, ties in directly with the segregation and racism that was being experienced and advocated on the ‘outside.’ Thus we can conclude that, perhaps unsurprisingly, the developments in prison literature occur as a direct result of the politics experienced in South Africa during apartheid.

Schalkwyk suggests that “the mirror is used, not to unfeature the image of the narrator as it is in Breytenbach, but as a medium of contact with another person – a contact which, the title proclaims, is the very ground of humanity” (1994: 33). Breytenbach uses mirror imagery as an attempt to define his sense of identity, whereas, as Schalkwyk points out, Cronin uses a mirror to ‘enlarge’ his world by reaching out to others. Another way of reading the mirror imagery in Cronin is to see it as communication in the form of sign language. In this sense it is actually a highly developed form of prison diction. At night time, (or during the day in the case of those on death row) prisoners were not in the position to use the prison diction as described thus far in this study because of the ‘no talking’ rule, but also had the need to communicate and so develop a ‘prison sign language’ completely unique to this subsection of South African literature. As has
already been shown, prison diction is an important part of prison literature: certain words take on new meanings in the prison situation and thus this diction is continued in this poem but through hand and not verbal interchange.

Cronin refers to a mirror again in a poem with the same title. The glass between Cronin and his visitors, in this case his wife, becomes a mirror. He makes contact with another person just as he did in the previous poem, but the mirror emphasizes the fact that he is looking at a reality of which he is not a part. In this case the mirror reflects and serves to remind him of the hostile space in which he finds himself.

Now hold tight
as we swim back to the air, but always
… only your face stares out with its nose
pressed
against an impassable glass frontier. (82)

Music and singing are often mentioned in prison literature. This aspect of prison literature was experienced and written about by Bosman. In his diary Sachs talks about the singing he and a fellow inmate used to take part in after lights out. We also find mention of this in Cronin’s poems. For the prisoner, to be able to join in song with another prisoner had profound emotional benefits. Whether a whisper, a whistle or a hum, the prisoners found hope in this music. It brought with it a sense of unity and togetherness that made them stand firm in their beliefs and the reasons why they were imprisoned in the first place. This sense of unity, as has already been mentioned, develops and strengthens parallel to the sense of exclusion that the National Party government was attempting to instill in these people. By hearing the tune of the then banned “Nkosi Sikele”, these prisoners had a sense of ‘outside reality’ brought into their cells, and with this reality came a sense of comradeship and self-worth. Brutus refers to singing as bringing a sense of comradeship but, more important than this personal gain, the singing powerfully embodies unity in resistance. Schalkwyk says that “one of Cronin’s most powerful, assured, and moving poems takes up that song
and represents, in his own voice, the antiphony of three condemned prisoners” (1994: 37). This poem, entitled “Death Row”, describes the experience of sitting on death row for months at a time, not knowing one’s fate. Cronin refers to the singing that takes place here.

Of course we never get to speak,  
As such, to each other.  
We’re still fifty yards, one corridor,  
Many locked locks apart.

*Nkosi sikelel’*, we try singing at night.  
Us down here, to you,  
Three condemned, along there.  
*Morena* …we whiteys sing,  
*Mayibuye iAfrika*, and muffled  
Far-off chortling, you guys  
Call back: *Encore! Encore!* (29)

For these three inmates, the singing they heard, however poor it might have been, brought them laughter and a sense of someone who cared. As previously noted, isolation can cause prisoners to disintegrate, mentally, physically and emotionally. In singing, they found a means of communication and a way in which to break the seemingly endless solitude.

Music was not a positive influence for all prisoners. The prisoners on death row had a habit of chanting on the night before someone was due to die. This chanting could not inspire or bring hope to those who were singing or just listening. In *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* Breytenbach mentions this chanting and how unpleasant it was to listen to. He says “my nights were populated and punctuated by the terrible outpouring in song of the so-called ‘condemns’ or ‘ropes’. I wrote one day a desperate plea … going in my words down on my knees, asking to be removed elsewhere because I couldn’t stand this stench of death” (1984: 26). Cronin also refers to this ‘death dirge’ when he refers to the singing that takes place in the hanging prison as being “mostly mournful.” The important factor here is that singing is a characteristic of Bosman’s prison
experience as recorded in his novel, and became common to all prison literature that has followed.

Cronin’s work was published in 1983 and thus he must be considered a ‘modern’ writer of prison literature. This serves to remind one that the features present in Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug* have now continued for close on half a century – or indeed longer, if one considers that Bosman was recalling experiences dating back to the late 1920s.

There are some important differences found in Cronin’s poetry too. While he is searching for some form of identity, Cronin is acutely aware of others who are in the same predicament, or worse, as himself. In the poem entitled “For Comrades in Solitary Confinement”, Cronin refers to his comrades, showing his characteristic quality of human fellow-feeling. This is different from Brutus, who writes more as an individualist and does not manifest the same degree of group solidarity and mutual affirmation in his poetry. Cronin’s deeply sympathetic attitude may also indicate the development of a group ethic, as is suggested by Lewin. This ethic is unique to political prisoners and grows with the increasing number of political activists being imprisoned. Once again we are made aware of a noteworthy development in this literature. When one places *Stubborn Hope* or *Letters to Martha* alongside *Inside*, there is a decisive shift from the individual poetic utterance of Brutus to poetry consciously crafted in a spirit of group identity and a communal ethic from Cronin. This subtle development is of utmost importance in terms of the argument that the development in prison literature occurs alongside the increasing politicization seen in South Africa.

Another facet of Cronin’s poetry that makes it unique is his constant use of the names of fellow prisoners – this is vital in the light of the fact that the prisoners often become nothing more than numbers in the huge abyss of the prison system. By using the prisoner’s names in his poetry, Cronin is deliberately restoring their identity. Examples of this can be found in “Walking on Air” where he refers to John Matthews, and in “Group Photo”
where he mentions Raymond, Dave K., Denis, David R., John and Tony. The naming of inmates would not have been permissible in a prison system that tried at all costs to hide the internal workings of the ‘inside’ as well as those who were incarcerated. (Many political prisoners died of unknown causes, and their families were informed months after the event.) This use of names in his poetry is purely an individual predilection on the part of Cronin, making his poetry unique and of importance to this study and prison literature as a whole.

In comparison to the poetry of Brutus, Cronin’s poetry is also more adventurous, less conventional. If one examines a poem like “Death Row” (26), for instance, Cronin tends to use incomplete sentences. The use of such short phrases recreates the sense of instability felt by the prisoners awaiting execution.

For months
your bodies probed
months long until

finally you were led
unbowed into court
and charged
all three
with high treason. (26)

There is confusion and uncertainty in these words. The shape in which the poem is written also highlights this. The prisoners know that the time of execution is coming closer and they are absolutely powerless to change this. The short sentences create an almost breathless reading, emphasizing the overwhelming awareness of the time when there will be no breath left.

Three voices
Called or
Moise
Combining or responding
Tsotsobe
Weaving
Shabangu
In and
Voices
Each other
Around of, sliding
Into each night’s
Finale … (30)

In “Walking on Air” the fragmented lines used by Cronin are indicative of the way in which Matthews related his story to him. Folli says “the short, staccato lines and stanzas imitate the manner in which Cronin heard the story: ‘in the prison workshop’, ‘in snatches’, which he ‘pieced together’” (1994: 107). I believe that this also suggests the lack of continuity in prison life. Thus prison poetry adds a new dimension to South African prison literature in terms of its visual affect and the added meaning thereof. This is especially true in later years (1980s) when South African poetry had become more innovative and less formal. Cronin is not merely reflecting this formal shift but using the change in style to add meaning to the content of his writing (as explained earlier). Thus, the staccato rhythms and truncated lines in addition to reflecting a more general shift in the style of South African poetry on the ‘outside’, also had particular meaning on the ‘inside’. At this point we must re-examine Bosman’s delight in the bizarre, truncated stories that prisoners told him. The fragmented nature of these stories (they were often interrupted by the interventions of warders or the end of a stint of work / exercise) could also be reflecting the fragmented and pointless nature of their lives and can be favourably compared to the fragmented nature of some of Cronin’s poetry. Once again we are aware of a noteworthy similarity between the writing of Cronin and Bosman – The Father of Prison Literature.

The punctuation of Cronin’s poems is especially noteworthy, and this ties in with the form discussed above. He uses the dash and ellipsis in many of his poems. In some instances this is to demonstrate the rhythm of prison life – whether it be the marching of the prisoners themselves or the steady beat of the boots of the warders walking the corridors between the cells. His use of short lines indicates bursts of thought that were constantly interrupted. This interruption in the form of a warder or some other prison
official could account for the lack of full stops in his poetry. It is almost as if he uses the short time he has available to say as much as he can as quickly as possible and to suggest that prison life (and therefore prisoners’ thoughts) were subject to the brutal, harshly regulated rhythms of the prison routine. Life in prison did not take the more humane shape and rhythm of unregulated life on the ‘outside’ but was subject to inhuman, staccato rhythms intended to break prisoners’ morale. Thus, punctuation provides added meaning and detail to prison poetry.

back to the cells,

that was that, then, but all the way down the passage toe-heel, hell-toe, diddle-diddle

ONE HUNDRED PERCENT I mean, he was high

off the ground, man.

He was walking on air. (14)

We see how the punctuation in the fourth line of this excerpt creates a rhythm typical of prison life as a whole.

Apart from the usual prison diction that one can find in most of this literature, Cronin adds a new element of diction into his poetry. He stated that he wished to reach a “wider range of South Africans … whose mother tongue is not basically English. Thus Cronin wrote many of his poems for oral performance” (Folli 1994: 100). Once again this indicates a significant variance that suggests that there is a development in the diction of the prison-authors over time. In some of his poems Cronin spells words as the African population pronounces them. They are spelt phonetically in terms of both the pronunciation and accent of his African comrades. “If one takes Cronin’s notion that … community is either signaled by or to be achieved in language, then the poet’s exemplification of various languages in fact enacts, in historical terms, division and conflict” (Schalkwyk 1994: 42). In doing this, Cronin is not only emphasizing a humanitarian aspect common
to prison literature, but also gesturing towards the spirit of resistance, as was mentioned earlier.

    Around of, sliding
    Into each night’s
    Finale, all three
    Three now
    As one: Tha-a-a
    Inta
    nasha – na – ale
    yooontes tha
    hooman
    reissss. a-MAAA
    – ndla ! lonleev
    sisulu-mandela-tambo
    LONGleev! LONGleev!

(“Death Row”: 30)

Here Cronin highlights the plight of the African prisoners who were on death row during this time. Schalkwyk says that the “local reality” in Cronin’s poetry, “is infused with a sense of actuality and kinship, nor is his use of language merely the superficial device of lending local color to the text” (1994: 41). This “local reality” brings about a cultural awareness. The reader is now exposed to the prison conditions of all prisoners, not only the white ones. The plight of the African prisoner as an individual has thus far not been highlighted in prison literature because of the very personal nature of the literature that tends to focus mainly on the ‘self’ by the predominantly white, early prison-authors. The fact that more recent prison-authors like Cronin include other races in his writings marks a considerable shift in South African prison writing. It not only indicates a development away from a private focus to a more public one, but also suggests the unity found among the prisoners; something unique to political prisoners. As the laws in the country became more stringent, so the solidarity between political prisoners strengthened. This is evident in the poetry of Cronin and the writings of other recent political prison-authors. This growth in solidarity as seen in the literature comes about as a reaction to the increased attempts at the separation of races and political groups by the government.
Thus we find another development that comes about because of increasing politicization. It also shows the compassion Cronin has for the other prisoners. This is clear in his poem “For Comrades in Solitary Confinement”:

Every time they cage a bird the sky shrinks. A little. Where without appetite – you commune with the stale bread of yourself, pacing to and fro, to shun, one driven step on ahead of the conversationist who lurks in your head. You are an eyeball you are many eyes hauled to high windows to glimpse, dopplered by mesh how-how-how long? the visible, invisible, visible across the sky the question mark – one sole ibis flies. (25)

This poem shows Cronin’s empathy with those who have to spend time in solitary confinement. More often than not Cronin writes to, for and about prisoners with whom he has had no contact. This is yet another facet of his writing that makes his poetry unique. Most prison writing focuses on the world of the prison-author and the few prisoners who form a part of that world. Cronin differs in providing a much wider spectrum of people and prison life. He does this in order to create a complete awareness of prison life in South Africa. This stylistic device provides insight into the uniqueness of Cronin’s poetry and suggests how important it is in the corpus of South African prison literature.

Cronin often enacts in his poetry the physical difficulty, the tongue-tied effort, of producing contemporary prison diction, especially when they come in unaccustomed syllables. And it is precisely the degree of ease or stammer, varied so effectively here, that registers, on the reader’s tongue, the level of union or alienation from specific forms of landscape, history, language and experience. (Schalkwyk 1994: 41)
Although Cronin’s diction is unique in terms of what had been previously used, it stills falls within the framework set up by Bosman. Cronin, like Bosman, uses a language typical to his personal prison experience and thus followed the trend of including prison diction in his writing.

**Hugh Lewin**

Hugh Lewin is well known for his prison novel *Bandiet*, which was discussed in the previous chapter. In the latest edition of *Bandiet* (2000), Lewin includes prison poetry and stories, some of which could not be published before because a few of the men mentioned in this writing were still in prison. These poems are slight in comparison to his novel, and will therefore be discussed only briefly here in order to substantiate some of the points about prison poetry made above.

Lewin’s poetry shares many of the themes of the poetry of Cronin and Brutus (and prison literature as a whole). The most prevalent theme to be found in Lewin’s poetry is that of death. This poem is called “Not So Easy”:

```
It’s really not so easy
   to kill yourself in prison.

I can’t say that I tried
   can’t say that I really considered it.
It was painful enough
   inching excruciatingly through the cell-days
   dragging sluggish shadows across the floor…

Took a blade one night
   and slashed at his head
   giving his baldness a lurid toupee
   which coagulated as he screamed for help.
He was put on punishment spare diet for a week…

Tom
   a year after his release from 12 years inside
   secure in the comfortable protection of outside
   successfully committed suicide. (Lewin 2002: 236)
```
This poem once again reiterates the hardships of prison life that these writers and others were forced to endure, giving powerful expression to the hostile environment in which they found themselves. Apart from death by their own hands, the prisoners were, at this time, aware of the constant threat of the death penalty. This can be seen in the poem entitled “Hang”:

I once met a man
who was about to undergo
a mild form
of humane hanging…
He was wearing regulation condemned dress
khaki tops and longs
without buttons
no laces, no tie, no belt
nothing to hang himself with
before he was hanged.

All steps possible
are taken to ensure
that a man about to suffer death
does not kill himself. (237)

The tone in which Lewin writes about death and the death penalty is cold and sardonically devoid of emotion. This wryly ironic tone is not typical of Lewin’s writing as a whole, however. His adoption of this tone serves two functions: in order to maintain sanity in an existence in which death was an almost daily occurrence, prisoners often cut themselves off from the unavoidable emotion which accompanies such an event and treated it with cool irony (Cold Stone Jug is predominantly written in this style); secondly, this detachment also has the effect of evoking a sense of horror in the reader. The irony of this poem continues: “We have a very humane form of execution: South African Prisons’ Official.” there is nothing more horrific than considering an execution as being humane. The officials go to such lengths to prevent a suicide of an inmate on death row, so that he or she can be executed. This statement was clearly made by the prison official to assuage his conscience for taking the life of another while being a cynical attempt on the part of Lewin at disguising the brutality of the regime.
As has been mentioned repeatedly, South African prison literature is multi-generic in nature. The writings of the prisoners can thus not always be classified in terms of the divisions suggested in this study. As stated in the previous chapter, it is not clear whether *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* should be discussed under novels or diaries. Or does it belong in a category of its own – drama? The same is true of Dennis Brutus. His *Letters to Martha* are written in the form of poetry, but are they prison letters or prison poetry?

The next chapter turns to the prison letter, another category of writing that must be included in any study of prison literature. The letter is the most vital form of communication for the prisoners, as is shown in this poem by Jeremy Cronin.

Tonight is an envelope
Into which I climb, sliding between its folds
The letter I, flesh made paper
Turning in half, then again
sleeplessly over.
Never more than 500 words
One letter per month quota, I take
Three weeks at least to arrive.
After their reckoning of words, after the censors,
After the ink-check, code-check, comes
A rubber stamping.
Tonight is this envelope into which I slide
As the selfsame letter formed on my tongue
My tongue turned into paper – tonight perhaps
Taking off as no more than 500 words
In a bat of the lids, it’s just
Possible to consider me as flying at last
As three week old words, behind the inside flap’s
Gummed
Touch to reach you. (Cronin 1983: 69)
LETTERS

As mentioned in earlier chapters, one of the few forms of communication that was afforded to a prisoner was the letter. The restrictions on the writing and receiving of letters were very rigid, however. The prisoner was only allowed one letter per month and the letters he or she wrote could not be longer than 500 words and were strictly censored. “Problems arising from correspondence were fairly uniform. Both the content and length of letters were strictly circumscribed. In addition to being cut, censored, lost – the most extreme form of censorship – and delayed, letters were often subject to other mindless and petty stipulations” (Gready 1993: 500). Basically, as a form of writing, letters became public property. Walter Sisulu recalls the writing of letters on Robben Island as being subject to countless rules:

During the early years of our imprisonment, we were only entitled to write and receive one letter every six months. But this was not the only restriction. We were not allowed to make any references to other prisoners, or to our prison conditions, or to make any comments that the prison authorities construed as ‘political’. Failure to adhere to these restrictions invariably resulted either in the letters being heavily censored, or not being posted at all. It was therefore inevitable that through pseudonyms, oblique references, innuendoes etc., prisoners became adept at conveying more that what was actually stated in words. We were not allowed to keep copies of letters we wrote. (Sisulu in Kathrada 2000: xvi)

The degree of censorship and stringency in the rules regarding the writing of letters steadily increased between the time of Bosman’s imprisonment and that of the more recent prison-authors. This suggests a development that is directly related to the increasing politicization of the country.

Some of the letters written in prison have been published in collections of prison correspondence. However, owing to the strict restrictions placed upon the writing and keeping of letters, there can be little doubt that much
of this branch of writing has been lost to prison literature. In this chapter *Letters from Robben Island* (2000) by Ahmed Kathrada will be examined in detail. I have chosen to use Kathrada’s letters because of the comprehensiveness of this particular collection and, more importantly, the fact that all the letters in this collection are directly related to Kathrada’s prison experience. Kathrada was able to publish this book because he used to smuggle out letters from Robben Island with prisoners who were returning home. He also copied each letter that he wrote and managed to keep it. Jailers confiscated some of his earlier letters but he was able to get the originals from the persons to whom he wrote them. Many prisoners included excerpts from their letters in their novels, poems or diaries, but Kathrada’s book is highly unusual in its comprehensiveness, and has therefore been chosen as the focus of this chapter. One example of the former is *Inside Apartheid’s Prison* by Raymond Suttner. This is the account of Suttner’s time in prison during the 1970s and 1980s. His story is interspersed with letters to his family and friends, both official and unofficial, but would fall into the genre of the novel rather than a separate collection of prison letters.

Like the writings previously discussed, prison letters have a rightful place in the corpus of South African prison literature because prisoners wrote them about their personal prison experience. They thus constitute a legitimate and valuable part of the body of prison writings. However, given the constraints (noted above) under which prisoners wrote these letters, it is rare to find a prison letter detailing life inside prison. Just as Cronin’s love poems to his wife are excluded from this study, so too will all letters that are not about specific prison experience. This exclusion cuts out much of the prison correspondence available, but there are some letters that are noteworthy and must be included.

The letter itself brings with it its own generic problems. In his article “Literature and Testimony in Gramsci’s *Letters from Prison*: The Question of Subjectivity”, Massimo Lollini asks, “How can we define the nature of a
text, such as a letter, that resists any literary and aesthetic connotation?”
http://www.uregon.edu/~maxiloll/Gramsci.htm. Let us begin by attempting to
answer the even more fundamental question: what is a letter?

A letter is a form of communication and correspondence, usually with a
specific audience in mind. This audience can range from one individual to a
group of people. Prison letters differ from other prison-writing genres
because they exhibit a far more emotive personal tone and content. They
were originally not written in order to be published and thus the content of
the letter usually offers a unique, private perspective on prison life. One of
the issues that need to be examined in this genre is the question of
subjectivity. A letter must, by the very nature of its epistolary form, be
subjective. All prison literature (indeed, all literature per se) is subjective to
a certain extent because it is a personal experience that is being related.
Letters, however, would be placed further along this objectivity–
subjectivity continuum because the focus and the reason for their being
written is so specific. Thus the letter provides an intensely personal and
private view of an individual’s prison life – one that not only concentrates
on external factors found in the prison but also includes the inner
experience of the prison-author him or herself.

It would be easy to classify letters as being autobiographical because of
the personal tone and subject matter contained therein. However, in the case
of prison letters, the political often comes across more strongly than the
personal, and this means that they typically are not as private (and
‘autobiographical’ in this sense) as other examples in the epistolary genre.
They tend, in other words, to move a private to a public focus. The prison
letter is of great importance to the prisoner and to prison literature as a
whole. Breytenbach demonstrates the importance of the letter in the
following remark:

Eventually I would get it. Not to read it immediately, no sir! (one learns to space
one’s joys; one learns how to spoil oneself.) Just to carry it around in your pocket at
first. To de-contaminate it. Then, eventually — after lock-up tonight — you would
unfold it, sniff the faint trace of perfume, and the walls would recede. Blue sky. A
million words between her lines. Her voice – laughing … scolding too! … Too soon the end … To carry me into the night and forward for days and days. (1984: 154)

The letter had the same effect on the loved ones on the ‘outside’ too. Walter Sisulu confirms this sentiment when he says, “writing letters from prison was a privilege which we cherished very dearly” (Sisulu in Kathrada 2000: xvi).

Gready argues for the significance of the letter to a study of literature when he says, “the letter was the most important written means through which a symbolic transformation of, and transportation between, worlds, and forms of the written word, could be achieved” (1993: 497). The transformation of the world of prison into words results in nothing less than prison literature – the importance of which has, it is to be hoped, been demonstrated by this study. The transformation of this hostile space into words takes the form of many genres, including the novels and poems already discussed. Letters are merely another form in which this transformation has taken place. As seen in the poem by Cronin quoted in the previous chapter, the letter was a means of ‘getting out.’ Similarly, Breytenbach states, “How could I be with my people [at Christmas]? I put myself into a letter…” (1984: 276). The written word is also able to be the bearer of hope and comfort: “as your letter opens / there is an unfolding of sky, of word from the outside / of memory” (Breytenbach 1984: 137).

According to Michael Dingake in My Fight Against Apartheid, letters were a lifeline that “kept us going in spite of their frequent use by officialdom as instruments of mental torture” (1987: 159). This, however, was not the feeling of all the prisoners with regard to letters. Indres Naidoo says that “so little happened on the Island or, rather, so little happened that we were allowed to write about, that getting something to say was quite difficult and we never got much pleasure from writing” (1983: 188).
AHMED KATHRADA

Ahmed Mohamed Kathrada (or “Kathy” as he is popularly known) was born on 21 August 1929 in Schweizer-Reneke, South Africa. As an Indian, he was squeezed between the two dominant races – the politically powerful whites and the numerically superior Africans – and he found it very difficult to understand why he was not allowed to attend school with white or black children. He became involved in politics at the age of ten when he distributed pamphlets for an Indian political organization and wrote its slogans on walls. He left school in order to work in a passive resistance campaign on a full-time basis. He later joined Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu in a Defiance Campaign that laid the foundation for the Congress Alliance. He was arrested many times from 1954 onwards, but continued his political work despite various bannings issued on him by the government. He was finally arrested in 1963 and stood trial in the famous Rivonia Trial where he was found guilty of committing acts of sabotage and was sentenced to life in prison. He served 26 years at Pollsmoor prison and on Robben Island. He was released in 1989 (Kathrada 2000: xxiii-xxvi).

While in prison Kathrada spent a great deal of time writing letters to both friends and family. According to Kathrada, some of the letters published in Letters from Robben Island had to be stolen back from the officials. In the foreword to the book, Nelson Mandela says:

they will give people a new kind of insight into what it was like as a member of a liberation movement to live in an apartheid jail for year upon year. Much has been written about this experience in memoirs and other books that look back [but] these letters provide an important record of a critical aspect of the struggle for freedom and justice in South Africa. (Mandela in Kathrada 2000: ix)

This statement is most valuable to this study as it emphasizes the importance of studying letters as a form of prison writing, and it shows that no matter how many similar characteristics are found in the novels, poems and letters, there is still a difference that must be noted. These differences provide reason for the inclusion of such a collection in this study and suggest specifically why Kathrada’s letters have been included here. The
letters are not merely a rendering of the prison novel or prison poem written in a different format. As we shall see, the generic particularities of the epistolary form bestow a distinctive quality on the writing itself.

It is important to note that this collection has been extensively edited by Robert D. Vassen. Vassen is a lifelong friend of Kathrada, and is in fact one of the people with whom Kathrada corresponded while on Robben Island. Vassen, an active member of the ANC, was forced into exile shortly after the Rivonia trial. In later years, Vassen, an English lecturer at Michigan State University, started working on Kathrada’s papers as a joint project with some of his colleagues. It was from this that idea of publishing his letters came about. Vassen put the collection together in time for Kathrada’s seventieth birthday (http://newsbulletin.msu.edu). Vassen not only annotated each letter, providing detailed explanation of the prison jargon and codes used by Kathrada, he also goes to great lengths to contextualize each letter in terms of whom they are written to and the relationship between Kathrada and the recipient.

Kathrada starts his time in prison on a positive note. He shows that he never loses hope. We have already seen how prisoners like Sachs and Cronin are determined to remain positive from the onset of their time in prison. This is an attitude not common to all prison-authors. “But I feel confident as ever that things won’t remain this way for long in this country. A change is inevitable and I feel it is almost imminent. Of course I’m by no means a dreamer who believes that freedom is around the corner, but I say change is imminent” (Kathrada 2000: 5). Kathrada’s letters continue to show evidence of a positive state of mind. He does however note that prison life can begin to take its toll on one. The Prisoners “have long exhausted all conversation relating to our experiences outside. All the jokes have been told; even gossip has become repetitive”(Kathrada 2000:47). In a letter written in 1968, his fourth year of imprisonment, Kathrada writes about all that he has to be thankful for: “I must say that being in prison has not been without its advantages. It has been a real boon to have been able to devote
time to reflection and thought and also to acquire a bit of education” (2000: 43). The fact that Kathrada refers to the education that he received is important. Sachs had to fight to be able to have books to read while he was in prison but as time passed prisoners were given the opportunity to study – as is the case with the more recent Robben Island prison-authors. There is clear development here as a result of changing laws within South Africa.

Kathrada’s later letters, especially those written between 1981 and 1989, were written from the cells of Pollsmoor Prison to which he was removed without any explanation. In terms of political content, one of the most valuable letters written during this time was one written in response to President P.W. Botha’s statement about the imminent release of political prisoners. All political prisoners would be released on condition that they no longer used violence as a means by which to further their objectives. In a very formal yet powerful response, Kathrada rejects this offer. Here Kathrada uses a cutting style, going straight to the heart of the matter. “We hesitate to associate you with a move which, on proper analysis, appears to be no more than a shrewd and calculated attempt to mislead the world into the belief that you have magnanimously offered us release from prison which we ourselves rejected” (2000: 174). Once again the language used by Kathrada shows his conviction and strong belief in the cause for which he was imprisoned.

An important difference is highlighted in letters like the one mentioned above. This comparative examination has not thrown up a single instance in which a novel or poem has exhibited such purely political (public) content. The fact that some letters were written for political purposes marks the difference between this and other genres. It also gives prominence to the fact that the content of prison writing, while still based on the framework set up by Bosman, changes over time. The conspicuous increase of politically based content in this literature must be linked to the increase of political activity on the ‘outside.’ He writes fervently about the cause for which he fought: “in the times in which we live in there is absolutely no
place for prejudices based on religion, race or colour“ (Kathrada 2000: 111). This letter was written to a family member with regard to the law that Muslims may not marry non-Muslims. At all times, Kathrada is aware of the discrimination found in society and continually advocates a society in which all people are equal.

The rest of Kathrada’s letters and his active participation in politics since his release show that he never gave up believing in freedom for all. The ideology of freedom for all, of which he is acutely aware, is not only extended to the human race. In a letter addressed to Helen Joseph in 1986, he tells her of the new privileges afforded to prisoners – one being able to keep pets. Kathrada does not wish to take up this privilege because he does not want to cage any living creature: “My first reaction to the latter concession was that, being a prisoner myself, the last thing I would want to do is imprison another living thing, be it bird or fish” (2000: 222).

Kathrada’s reaction shows that he too, like Bosman and the other prison-authors and poets discussed, was acutely aware of being on the ‘inside’ and of the value of freedom. This is one of many thematic concerns common to Kathrada’s letters and prison literature as a whole.

I turn now to the similarities Kathrada’s writing displays vis-à-vis other prison literature. To begin with, the actual act of writing is a theme discussed at great length by many of the prison-authors. It forms a part of the broad framework that has been set up in order to classify prison literature as such. Kathrada continues this pattern when he writes in his letters about the value of writing and how important it was to keep some sort of account of his political activities for their historical value. I would suggest that he had the foresight to know that most of what he experienced while working underground and during his imprisonment would never be documented by the apartheid government. For the sake of completeness, he wanted to be able to fill in the historical gaps. He says in the first letter:

> there are lots of things concerning the period of my underground days which I am tempted to write about but which it is inadvisable to broach at this stage. They are things best left for history. That is one of the reasons why I ask you again to give serious thought to the diary, collection of material etc. … I am getting more and
more keen that one day these must be written up … In the years to come there will be
different versions of the history of the past 20 to 30 years – and I must see at least
one version influenced by the way I have lived through these years and the way I
look at them. (2000: 6)

These are very important words. They substantiate the claim that this study
has been making – i.e. that prison literature provides a new history for
South Africa – and show that, unlike the other prison writers examined in
this study, Kathrada from the outset of his imprisonment had the aim of
publishing in mind. Once again we note a move from the private to the
public focus. This is a very important reason for the inclusion of his letters
in this study. In a letter written to Oliver Tambo in 1988, Kathrada
expressed his hesitation at having his letters published. He felt that the
authorities would become vindictive and possibly take away his privilege of
writing letters. He says, “if, after having considered the above remarks, the
folks outside still wish to proceed with their plans [of publishing], I will
submit to their judgement” (2000: 237). Kathrada realized throughout his
imprisonment that his thoughts and his mind could not be imprisoned. The
political content of these writings increases rapidly. This too must be
regarded as a development that directly ties in with the politics of the
country.

Kathrada writes not only for the sake of politics. He too finds a solace
in writing, especially during those times in the year when a special occasion
or religious festival would be taking place on the ‘outside.’ He gets
particularly sentimental over Easter and Christmas. “It is a time when one
feels a bit nostalgic. And the best cure for this condition as far as I am
concerned is to write letters. This has become my fixed habit for many
years now. In this way I manage to feel closeness with people with whom I
might, under different circumstances, be spending the weekend” (2000: 93).

The content of Kathrada’s letters includes details of his daily routine in
prison – another characteristic common to prison literature: “…living with
the same faces day in day out…” (Kathrada 2000: 47). However, in terms of
the literature examined in this thesis, Kathrada’s daily routine is unique
because he is the only prison-author who spent such a long time on Robben
Island. Kathrada experienced many of the historically important changes made on Robben Island in terms of South African prison policy. These changes are seen in the content of his letters, signaling a development in the writing that is a direct result of politics. In this regard, his collection of letters must be considered one of the foremost examples of contemporary prison literature. He writes to his family members about his status as a ‘D’ prisoner (the lowest-ranking prisoner on the island). He tells of the hard labour that they were forced to perform, like the breaking up of stones. He also tells of how many regrets he has, one being not having completed any formal education. The fact that he discusses regrets shows that he had become self-reflexive in prison. Evidence of this type of thinking is common to all prison literature. “Only now I appreciate how hasty and unwise I was to give up my studies 18 years ago…” (2000: 39). All the prison-authors examined thus far have shown a magnified self-awareness and have questioned their self-identity as a result of their imprisonment.

As with the other political prisoners already discussed, the spirit of resistance is clearly found in the letters of Ahmed Kathrada. Kathrada wrote letters that are full of humour and wit, but he also never fails to bring across his strong political beliefs and sharp insight. “These qualities shine through the letters as they illuminate the ways in which we rose to the challenge facing every prisoner, especially political prisoners, how to survive the prison intact, and to emerge from prison undiminished” (Mandela in Kathrada 2000: ix). In writing resistance literature, Kathrada continues the trend found in earlier prison literature. The first letter that appears in this selection was written before his trial while he was still being held under the Ninety-Day Detention Act. The letters that Kathrada wrote during this time were smuggled out by his lawyer, Bram Fischer. Although at this stage Kathrada did not have to be concerned about censorship, he was careful about what he said and whose names he mentioned. This letter was written to his girlfriend at the time of his arrest, Sylvia Neame, in February or March 1963. He shows an awareness of the cruel treatment of political
prisoners even at this early stage of his imprisonment. “Robben Island is a veritable hell of brutal assaults … broken arms, heads and huge weals all over the body” (Kathrada 2000: 51)

There is a strong political overtone in Kathrada’s letters that demonstrates his implacable resistance to the apartheid government. If, as Foucault states, the purpose of imprisonment is to rehabilitate and reform, then the prison system failed in the case of many political prisoners, including Kathrada. His writing does not show any signs of change in terms of his political views and aspirations. He writes to Sylvia about whites and blacks living in harmony. He is constantly aware that the Rivonia Trial will probably make history and refers to an incident in his hometown in the following way: the “apartheid juggernaut must move on, trampling mercilessly on life and livelihood, oblivious to any injury to human feelings and desires” (2000: 34). One detects the bitterness that has grown in him as a result of the actions and hurt caused to his people by the apartheid government. Although there is often some political overtone in the rest of his letters, after Kathrada was sentenced and removed to Robben Island, he had to be far more careful about what he wrote later because of censorship. In a letter written to a group of South Africans living in exile in London, and still actively involved in the African National Congress, he says: “There are so many friends about whom I should like to know; but as a lot of them are political, I’ll have to resist the temptation to enquire after them. It may just rub the authorities the wrong way and may prejudice our communications” (2000: 43). Many of his early letters written while on Robben Island were mainly about life on the island itself. This shows the continuing awareness of the hostile space that was imposed on him upon being imprisoned.

As mentioned earlier, many of Kathrada’s letters include a humorous anecdote. As we saw in the cases of prison writers like Breytenbach and Lewin, laughter was a form of redemption in prison. It was a positive emotion, which helped the prisoners deal with the many adversities that
they encountered. I believe the same is true of Kathrada. Humour is not only a positive force for himself but also for those to whom he is writing. This displays his warm, human qualities. Being acutely aware of the feelings of others, especially those on the outside, is a common trait evident in most prison writing. In a letter written in 1964, Kathrada recalls an interrogation incident in which an Afrikaans lieutenant by the name of Swanepoel was desperately trying to extract information from him. In response to the questions asked of him, Kathrada recited a poem by the well-known Afrikaans poet, Jan Celliers. He said: “Ek hou van 'n man wat sy man kan staan.” Literally translated this means ‘I like a man who stands as a man.’ The poem from which this excerpt is taken, notes Kathrada, was originally written as a praise poem for “a person who in the face of adversity can hold his own” (2000: 15). Considering the sentencing that faced Kathrada, this was a rather brave response to make. It is also deeply ironic that Kathrada uses the language of the oppressor in order to make light of a difficult situation. However, another interpretation of the incident is to see that Kathrada was astutely using the language of the oppressor to establish a common humanity between interrogator and prisoner, and this made it impossible for the interrogator to persist. According to Kathrada, Swanepoel backed off immediately and left him alone.

Another common theme in Kathrada’s letters is the quest for knowledge by studying and keeping the mind active. During his stay on Robben Island, the authorities permitted the political prisoners to study through the University of South Africa. Many of the prisoners, including Kathrada, completed a number of degrees while there. (This is one of the reasons that Robben Island is referred to today as the University of Robben Island.) Like humour, studying helped the prisoners withstand the ploys of the prison officials. Focused hours of study meant that the prisoners’ minds did not have time to wander. In a letter to a Mr. Hoosenbhai, Kathrada substantiates this claim when he says, “Over the years, our books have helped to keep our minds fully occupied” (2000: 45). Unfortunately the
letter was written in order to bemoan the fact that the authorities had decided to remove this ‘privilege.’ Education was not a privilege afforded to all prisoners and thus does not form part of the framework of prison literature as suggested in this study. The commonality, however, is Kathrada’s awareness of the importance of keeping his mind active. All the prison-authors are aware of the pending threat of madness during incarceration (Bosman was especially conscious of this). Education was the means by which Kathrada could keep his mind active and avoid insanity or a deep depression.

Like all prisoners, Kathrada was also constantly aware of death. In one of his letters to Sylvia, he writes that he hopes he will not be hanged. But for Kathrada, like Cronin, death touches him in a more personal way, through the death of his mother while he was still on Robben Island. (She died in 1972.) “This spectre of death [we hope] will be kept away from one’s near and dear ones … yet when the blow strikes the faculties are numbed and one reacts with all the emotions that are normal to human beings” (2000: 57). Death became a common occurrence to Kathrada: many of his comrades committed suicide or were killed and many family members and friends passed away while he was imprisoned. Many of the letters written by him are letters of condolence to the families and loved ones who were left behind. One death that affected him deeply was that of his friend and lawyer Bram Fischer. Kathrada uses an almost poetic style in his letter of sympathy to Bram’s children when he talks about “my fellow countryman, my mentor, my comrade, my lawyer, my co-prisoner, my friend. A free man who fought against his own people to ensure the freedom of others” (2000: 69). The fact that Kathrada can still write with such feeling shows that the prison system had not succeeded in making him cold and devoid of all emotion – the same can be seen in the writing of prisoners like Breytenbach. This point brings us to the differences to be found in this comparative examination.
The tone, style and diction of each of the letters, for the most part, remain quite formal, but what makes his writing unique is his use of code and a personal kind of diction that he adopted during his time in prison. Kathrada’s unique use of language is another justification for the inclusion of his letters in this study. He was forced to create this coded language due to the strict censorship to which the letters were subjected. The use of code makes the reading of these letters rather difficult to follow and understand; however, the editor of this particular selection has extensively footnoted where possible (see below). The fact that the editor of this collection makes such an important contribution to the collection could detract from the original meaning of letters. He does deal with this in his note when he says that, “if my interpretation is inaccurate or inappropriate, I assure the reader that it was unintentional and I offer apologies” (Vassen in Kathrada 2000: xxi). His notes include explanations on both the contents of the letters as a whole as well as specific terminology that can be found in the letters. If someone did an “Oosie”, for example, this person committed suicide. Kathrada created this word after a friend of his by the name of Oosthuizen committed suicide. A “burnt blanket” was the code name that Kathrada used for a fellow detainee, Jack Tarshish. The list of codenames used throughout this selection of letters is both ingenious and endless. Without the aid of the footnote, a reader would not follow a prison-author’s logic in such cases. Thus it would be a futile exercise to publish prison letters without any annotation. His use of code continues throughout his time on Robben Island. In a letter written in 1975, he uses the metaphor of sport to refer to political parties, specifically the African National Congress, which he referred to as “your team” (2000: 73).

As seen in earlier chapters, music becomes a vital aspect of prison life for the inmates. Although this is true of Kathrada and could be considered a common characteristic found in his writing, I have deliberately included it in this section, detailing the differences. His use of musical terminology forms a part of the code that is unique to Kathrada. He writes of his attempt
to play the harmonica and of his desire to learn how to play the guitar. His letters are frequently decorated with musical references, something from the ‘outside’ that he was able to retain on Robben Island. From 1978 Kathrada uses his references to music as part of a code. He uses the names of musicians and composers in place of the names of political comrades. Just before Nelson Mandela’s 60th birthday, the first manuscript of *Long Walk to Freedom* was smuggled out of prison in the hopes of having it published before Mandela’s birthday. In reference to this, Kathrada creates a musical metaphor. “Some time ago we heard of plans to issue a special birthday edition which would sort of be biographical with music and songs of different periods in the musician’s life” (2000: 94).

A facet of Kathrada’s writing that is unique and possibly one of the main reasons why such writing should be included in this study is his continual involvement with his family and friends. Most of the prison literature examined up to now contains scant reference to the outside world and that of individual writer’s families. This, however, is not true of Kathrada. While the content of his letters does make constant reference to his prison experiences, he is equally constantly involved in his family’s life. This takes the form of concern over their health and welfare, giving advice about education or relationships and, where applicable, congratulations and condolences. In fact many of his letters written between 1971 and 1980 include some of his memories from his childhood. He remembers the time when he lived in Schweizer-Reneke where “there was a school for African children and one for white children but none for ‘Indian’ children. The law demanded strict segregation” (Kathrada 2000:58). This letter shows not only strong family ties, but also his early exposure to apartheid. At no time does the reader find Kathrada completely immersed in his own life or the hardships that he was enduring.

Prison is a picture of great warmth, fellowship, friendship, humour and laughter; of strong convictions; of a generosity of spirit of compassion, solidarity and care, …but more importantly, where one comes to know oneself, one’s weaknesses, inadequacies and one’s potentials. Unbelievably, it is a very positive, confident, determined – yes, even a happy community. (Kathrada 2000: 247–248)
Prison officials returned many of Kathrada’s letters to him because they infringed the regulations set down, or because the officials objected to whom they were written. (A case in point is a letter that he wrote in 1976 to a thirteen-year-old congratulating her on her swimming achievements. The letter was never sent because the police objected to the person to whom it was written.) The letters provide valuable insight into the life of a prison-author on Robben Island. At the same time they are unique in their style and diction, and thus make a valuable contribution to this study and to South African prison literature as a whole. After 25 years in prison, Kathrada wrote, “there was no magic or secret formula to meet the challenges that lay ahead. What was needed was determination, a positive approach and above all to doggedly maintain the basic values with which we have grown up” (2000: 262).

DIARIES

In his article of the same name, Oliver Lovesey refers to the prison diary as “chained letters.” Prison diaries are the most personal forms of writing scrutinized in this study, and as a result of this highly personal and intimate voice, very few diaries have been published.

The writer of the diary differs from the poet or the novelist in that a diary is usually not intended to be published. It should be observed, of course, that not all poems are written for public consumption either; however, diaries are a particularly private form of literary expression. The novelist and the poet generally write with the purpose of sharing their experiences with an audience, whereas the writer of a diary in almost all cases is writing for him or herself. That is not to say that publication is not a consideration for the diarist, but it is usually not the main purpose for writing.
Wole Soyinka’s *The Man Died: Prison Notes of Wole Soyinka* (1972) is probably the best known and most widely read example of a prison diary. It is, of course, Nigerian in provenance and therefore falls outside the purview of this study. The same is true of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary* (1981). A comparative analysis of prison literature across different countries and continents would no doubt yield many similarities in terms of the content and style.

One of the best-known prison diaries published in South Africa is Fatima Meer’s *Prison Diary: One Hundred and Thirteen Days, 1976* (2001). Meer was an activist from Durban who recorded her time in prison in the form of a diary. She was held in the Old Fort in Johannesburg that, in 1976, was a prison for women. This particular diary focuses, for the most part, on the autobiographical and sociological elements of her imprisonment, which is in keeping with the criterion common to prison literature as established by *Cold Stone Jug*. She, too, writes about her political beliefs and the atrocities of the apartheid government. As is the case in other prison literature, however, she is also able to introduce humour into what would otherwise have been a completely bleak situation. On Friday, September 24, 1976, she writes:

> We have a new 90-day detainee. Her name is Edith. She is older than us, pushing 60, a slim, athletic, sensible woman, quite the most unlikely candidate for terrorism. She is in prison because she distributed leaflets … They found a copy of Alan Paton’s ‘Cry, the Beloved Country’ among her meagre possessions and took it with them as proof of her terrorist influences. (2001: 96)

This particular entry has a number of features that mark Meer’s diary as conforming to the common criteria of prison literature as set out in Chapter Three. Meer writes in the first person, makes historical references, and shows a concerned awareness for those around her.

Lovesey says that the prison diary writes the story of the nation’s contradictions from within its very centre (1995: 32). This has been manifested in the previous chapters, where it is obvious that the treatment of prisoners, especially political prisoners, was totally at odds with the statements that were being made in the government at the time. Lovesey
considers Breytenbach’s *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist* as an example of a prison diary, which confirms, once again, that prison literature is complex. I have chosen to include Breytenbach’s work under novels simply because it does not take the usual form of a diary.

The diary shares many of the common characteristics of prison writing as seen in the prison novel and prison poetry. “It allegorizes the individual’s imprisonment, and the denial of history and truth contained in it, relating personal and national detention … the African prison diary brushes against the grain of official histories of the prisoner’s activities; it rewrites official ‘master narratives’ of national history” (Lovesey 1995: 32–35). This remark points to the depth of historical value that prison writing offers and is another common feature of both the prison diary and *Cold Stone Jug*. Without these narratives many truths about imprisonment in South Africa and the conditions thereof would never have been revealed. Lovesey’s remark that the diary “brushes against the grain of official histories” reminds us that so much of the writing in prison was censored and as a result prison-authors could not openly write about their prison experience. They would have to work by implication and suggestion to demonstrate that the ‘official histories’ were not providing all the facts. Even though the diary is an example of personal writing, there was always the chance that it could be found and therefore the writers had to very careful.

Like prison poetry, the prison diary is a very personal account of the writer’s time in prison. However, whereas poetry typically attempts to distil human experience in fairly abstract and compressed form, the writer of the diary would have greater freedom to record the concrete specificities of daily life in as much detail as is required. Thus, in reading the prison diary, the reader gets a far more concrete and detailed view of the entire experience of imprisonment. “The prison diary is a detailed psychological account of a mind in sensory and emotional deprivation, an intense moral self-examination, and a forum on national issues. The individual’s isolation from the community is linked to the nation’s traumatized self-alienation”
(Lovesey 1995: 34). The “emotional deprivation” referred to by Lovesey suggests a separation from those on the outside, felt by the diarist – a sense of being on the ‘inside.’ Together with this awareness comes the search for identity that is common to most prisoners and can be found in most prison writings. This search would include “an intense moral self-examination”. Lovesey’s use of the words “detailed” and “intense” suggests something about the emotion that is evident in the prison diary. This makes the diary comparable to prison poetry in terms of emotional content. The personal tone found in a diary is also a clear result of the hostile space in which the diarist finds him or herself. If the diarist does not write for the sole purpose of publication, then the writing done is purely a means by which to come to terms with and deal with the hostile space forced upon him or her in prison. We have already seen how writing becomes a means by which to retain one’s sanity and this is also is true for the prison-diary. A prison diary (more so than prison poetry,) is an attempt to record the daily details of prison life as a kind of ‘personal record’. It has a more ‘documentary’ or ‘testimonial’ function – and as a result, it serves as a kind of historical testament to the specific details of incarceration.

**The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs – Albie Sachs**

Sachs was born in 1935 and grew up in Cape Town. He studied law when he left school and was arrested for the first time in 1952. The judgment in this case restored Sachs’s faith in the law. He was arrested again in 1963 and this time was held for 168 days under the 180-day Act. After his release he went into exile. Sachs’s first prison experience was very different from his second. He was able to refuse to make a statement during his first time in jail. “He had previously been a symbol of resistance who had remained uncompromised during 168 days of detention” (Gready 1993: 506). Unfortunately the same was not true of his second term in detention.
Sachs failed to meet the standards he had set for himself and made a statement within twenty-four hours of his second arrest.

As a result of Sachs’s re-examination and rewriting of himself and his prison experience, he “provides South African prison literature with a complex and ambiguous understanding of heroism, of the relationship between self and self-image, of autobiographical ‘truth’, and the oppositional power of writing” (Gready 1993: 507). He may not have provided a ‘perfect’ prison account that clearly shows his emotions, reactions and actions within the prison system, but he does provide a unique piece of prison literature and therefore *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* is included in this study.

As in other prison-literature, one sees heightened personal awareness in *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs*. Sachs says that his experience in solitary confinement made him intensely aware of his psyche. Cuthbertson said that upon reading *The Jail Diary* he felt “a greater reminiscence than in Breyten Breytenbach’s pretentious postmodernist *The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, which lacked the authenticity and historicity of a diary” (1991: 107). I agree with Cuthbertson, Sachs’ writing is far more accessible to the average reader in that his simple unpretentious style makes prison life real. Breytenbach, in choosing to write a post-modernist novel about his prison experience, immediately distances the reader from his experience. Sachs’s underlying message is one of hope.

Another important theme in Sachs’s writing is the re-evaluation and rewriting of the role of the prisoner as a hero or heroine. By being sensitive to all that is happening around him, it is only natural that Sachs would examine and re-examine the role of the prisoner. This parallels Bosman’s framework in terms of awareness of identity. Sachs realizes that he himself had set unrealistic standards for future prisoners. Gready says that “techniques of interrogation had been refined to such a degree and the encounter was so fundamentally unequal that almost all could be broken sooner or later and to some degree. To pretend otherwise was to perpetuate
a dangerous illusion” (1993: 507). He looks at the role of the prison hero, and realizes that not everyone could be expected to withstand interrogation, torture and solitary confinement. Descriptions of the latter are common to all prison writings and an important part of the sociological dimension of prison literature. Sachs breaks Bosman’s pattern of writing about the hardships of prison life by initially being able to withstand the interrogation, but upon re-examination he admits that these facets of prison life will always exist. Thus, according to Sachs, some of the criteria set by the framework found in *Cold Stone Jug* can be considered indisputable in all prison writings.

Another similarity found in Sachs’s work is his dealing with the theme of writing. Perhaps most significantly, like Bosman he had difficulty in writing. This started with the form in which he was to write. He says that “a book is too flat, too controlled, too wordy, too abstract … I want something better, more immediate, with live people standing up and voices sounding…” (1982: 93). Thus experiencing difficulty in writing, something shared by Bosman and Sachs, provides what is possibly the most unusual feature of *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs*. He ends his jail diary by saying “I write and I write … I must record my story as accurately and as honestly as I can. Then should they take me in again I will know that there is something of me outside which will continue to exist whatever they do to me” (1982: 285). This remark suggests a movement from the private focus of Bosman to the public focus of Sachs and other political prisoners. Not only does this show that writing is vital for prison-authors, it also shows the awareness of ‘inside’ versus ‘outside.’ These ideas began in *Cold Stone Jug* and still continue in more recent prison literature such as *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs*.

Clearly, one of the main purposes in writing a prison diary is to be ‘cleansed.’ Thus for the diarist, the actual act of writing becomes vital. This is true for all prisoners writing across all the genres. Like the novelist and the poet, the diarist would also have been subjected to horrific conditions in
prison. In writing a diary, the prisoner has an opportunity to rid himself of the memories and the hardships that he had to endure during the course of a specific day. Another purpose of writing a prison experience, as mentioned earlier in the case of Sachs, is the need to provide a ‘testament’ of the prison-author’s incarceration. In doing this, the prison author ensures that his or her presence during imprisonment is acknowledged even though he or she was on the ‘inside’. Writing is an emotional release for all the prisoners but more so in the case of the writer of the prison diary. The diary becomes a personal outpouring for the prison-author with him or herself as the initially intended audience. Without the awareness of a possible public focus, the diarist can be true to his or her emotions thereby using the writing as a mechanism of release, a means by which to cope. Thus, the diarist will not experience the same need that the novelist or poet might have to include fiction into his or her writing.

There are certain differences between the writing of Sachs and that of other prison-authors. Jacobs says that what distinguishes this book is “its intriguing meta-narrative, as Sachs tries to imagine the memoir he will one day write, envisaging it as a play about spatial and temporal disorientation, about encapsulating in the self, and about the multiplicity of such experiences in South African cells” (1994: 1312). This “meta-narrative” or “super-narrative” (Barry 1995: 86) differs from the narratives examined thus far because Sachs makes his prison experience larger than life, one in which he can get lost. In contrast, other prison-authors place their prison experience in context – that being only a part of their life experiences. Perhaps Sachs, by making his prison experience larger than life, is the only prison-author who deals with the realism and magnitude of being a prisoner. Imprisonment is and always will be a life-changing experience, the enormity being inexplicable to those on the ‘outside’. I would like to suggest that in using super-narrative, Sachs, unlike any other prison-author, is attempting to show the importance of this significant period in his life.
The uniqueness of this particular prison account continues with the form in which it was written. “My present world has too much shape and volume to be compressed into a book, it needs air and height. The cells are too sturdy and real to be crushed into the flatness of words … I will write a play” (1982: 93). This remark highlights the idea suggested above: Sachs’s prison experience became his world – it was larger than life itself. Not only does this section show the uniqueness of Sachs’s form of writing, but also his awareness of the hostile space in which he found himself. Sachs’s physical hostile space differs from that of other prison-authors because he spent most of his jail term in solitary confinement – a hostile space incomparable to that of a general cell or even death row. In terms of the lens provided by Foucault, Sachs’s body was reorganized and supervised in a single cell, without any contact with other inmates. The power to punish as used here was an attempt to break Sachs’s resolve not to talk.

As a result of his solitary confinement, Sachs was not exposed to very much of prison life as such. Breytenbach and Lewin became a part of the system and so could write about their daily routines, the warders and inmates with whom they would interact. Sachs, on the other hand, was by himself and as a result wrote much about what was going on his head, almost as if he were having a conversation with himself throughout his imprisonment. “So this is what prison life is like. The quiet is complete and I am alone in my cell …” (1982: 4). The fact he was in solitary confinement could also explain why prison becomes his world: he has no contact with anyone on the ‘inside’ and thus the prison, his space, is all that he has. The thought process that is written about also shows a marked difference between Lewin’s and Sachs’s writing. Where Lewin is not introspective in his account, Sachs becomes contemplative. He writes in the present tense, which suggests that his is an ongoing analysis and examination of himself. The use of present tense once again highlights that for Sachs, prison becomes his life. He adjusts to the new surroundings immediately. His use of the first-person does not distance himself from the experience (whereas
Breytenbach and Bosman avoided relating themselves to other prisoners and their prison experience through the deliberate use of the third-person). Like all prison-authors, his quiet internal contemplation and analysis can be seen as a means by which to stay sane – by keeping his mind active.

It has been shown that Sachs’s prison experience was completely different to that of Bosman, Breytenbach and Lewin because he was not beaten up or tortured. In his *Jail Diary*, he states that physical torture was not something to which he was exposed: “A team of interrogators worked in shifts alternating violent verbal attacks with ‘attrition by silence’” (1982:15). Sachs was deprived of sleep. The fact that he was not physically tortured suggests that the punishment of early political prison-authors was not as violent and as focused on the body as it was for their later counterparts. This development is directly related to the increase of physical violence on the outside. History clearly shows a marked increase of violence in South Africa in the 1980s. This increased the violence on the ‘inside’ too. Subsidiary techniques were used, such as deliberate “distortions of time, mood and causality in relation to facts that were insignificant in themselves” (Gready 1993: 506). Sachs’s soul was reorganized and supervised, rather than his body. Instead of physical torture to ‘reform’ him, the prison officials chose to reform him through mental torture. Sachs was privileged in that he was also allowed access to books for a part of his time in solitary confinement. He had the added advantage of being a lawyer and so he knew the law as well as some of the police did.

What is amazing about his account is the fact that he held out for so long. We see how early in Breytenbach’s interrogation he began to speak, but Sachs never did. This was not an easy feat.

A range of novelists, poets, and writers of letters and diaries has been considered thus far. These were all people who shared their personal prison experiences in writing and who therefore had a role in fashioning the corpus of South African prison literature. However, one cannot claim that this is a form of writing that has a gender bias. In recent years there has been a
distinct shift: from being an almost exclusively male preserve, prison literature has come to include many more women’s voices. The next chapter attempts to take stock of this development.
CHAPTER NINE

PRISON WRITING OF WOMEN

SHUT AWAY

Ya comrade
I tried
to write poetry
fit for reading
fit for reciting
but then
my persona
became lekker bedonderd
about being shut away
in a cold cell
so I wrote poetry
fit for you
and fit for me

(Jessie Duarte IN Schreiner 1992: 140)

“We have a long tradition of prison literature in South Africa, no doubt a factor arising from the criminalisation of our society, but among this long history there have, until recently, been few voices of women” (Schreiner 1992: 5). Although prisoners are commonly thought of as being male, there are a number of women who were not only imprisoned, but who wrote about their experience too. The fact that, as Schreiner says, the voice of the female prison-author has only recently begun to be heard suggests a development in a literature from one that was predominantly a male preserve to one that has begun to include female writings too. Because women have typically been considered ‘weaker sex’, early twentieth century prison authorities did not consider them either mentally or physically capable of committing a crime. Pillay says that, “many researchers have undertaken criminal studies, focusing on prison life and the male prisoner … Women’s prisons have long been shrouded in secrecy, and female prisoners have been regarded as non-existent entities” (2000: 156). This stereotype has been shattered. Criminal behaviour is probably
one of the few areas of modern life where women have gained true equality with their male counterparts in terms of the crimes they commit.

However similar the crimes committed by women, their prison experiences, as manifest in their writings, show many differences. Mohamed, in an essay about her prison experience put in a collection of the writings of prison-authors called *Lives of Courage* (1989), highlights one of these differences when she says, “The way women experience detention is totally different from the way men do. I burst into tears when a security policeman said to me, ‘I really enjoy interrogating women. I can get things out of them and do things to them that I can’t do to a man.’ I was terrified by this statement. I felt more horror and pain about it than when I was physically hit …” (Mohamed in Russell 1989: 496). Violence perpetrated by prison officials is a common complaint by prisoners. The way in which each individual prisoner responded to the violence is one of the ways in which specific prison texts became unique. One cannot say that all women reacted emotionally, because in the case of prisoners like Makhoere, violence towards her or other inmates just made her angrier and more determined to fight. A poster published in 1987 by the ‘Detainees Parents Support Committee’ stating “A woman’s place is in the struggle not behind bars” (Schreiner 1992: 123) illustrates this determination of Makhoere and others like her.

What is beyond question and true of all the writers is the fact that prison leaves an indelible mark upon their souls. Mashinini states that “prison is not something that you can leave behind. Those six months brought about a great change in me” (1989: 105).

Before examining some of the writings by women prisoners in some detail, a listing of the entire corpus of this writing is perhaps necessary. The following list also includes works by women in which only a section is devoted to their prison experience.
Women were arrested in large numbers from the 1960s onwards in an attempt by the government to crush all black political opposition. It was during this time that the government introduced the Ninety-day Law, which was successfully implemented as a means by which to detain prisoners without a trial. Many of the women initially found themselves imprisoned under this law. Several women have written about this experience in particular. This chapter will briefly examine some of these prisoners and their writing and show how the common characteristics of prison literature can also be found in the works of female prisoners. This provides proof that prison literature is not gender-specific. It must be noted at this point, however, that the purpose of this study is not to investigate the emergence
of feminism from the writing of female prison-authors but rather to examine whether or not their writing follows the pattern as laid out by Herman Charles Bosman. We will also examine the differences found in this literature. More often than not these differences suggest that there has been a marked development in the writing of prison literature that I believe ties in with the political change in South Africa as a whole.

The writing of female political prisoners cannot and must not be regarded as a “specific way of creating a revolutionary basis for feminist activity” (Davies 1990: 55). Their writing is as important as that of their male counterparts. Just as prison literature written by males has, throughout this study, been shown as having immeasurable worth to South African literature, so too must the same value be accorded to the writing of women. Women’s prison literature is a voice that should not be silenced or oversimplified by placing it under the broad umbrella of feminism. These prison-authors were not writing to assert their gender, but rather, like the male prison-authors, as a means by which to share their prison experience, protest against their imprisonment and cleanse themselves of the ghosts that remained with them upon their release. Davies goes on to say that the differences in style might be seen if we contrast male with female writing but “they are not as great as the overwhelming power of the deconstructive act of all community-related writing which peels away the pretentiousness of the values which seem to hold our societies together. The writing that emerges out of a collective experience displays a symbiotic relationship between the individuals who are incarcerated and the community of which they see themselves as a part” (1990: 237). Prisons must be considered as communities in their own right. Male and female (in later years) became a part of this community and therefore Davies shows that it is far more important to examine the community that this writing is about rather than search for differences in writing styles that could possibly be attributed to gender differences. Thus the similarities found in the content of the writing is of far more value than the differences seen in a critical analysis of the
language and style used. These similarities bind the genders and because both male and female prisoners are of one community – the prison community – male and female prison writing can be grouped together as South African prison literature.

It must be noted, however, that even though prison literature is not the domain of one gender alone, one cannot overlook the fact that part of the actual content of the various writings may be gender-specific. An example of this would be the tasks that prisoners are required to perform in prison. These tasks have a heavy gender bias: male prisoners were required to complete tasks requiring brute strength (especially true in the case of prisoners on Robben Island who were forced to dig and break rock) whereas women prisoners were involved in knitting and sewing. Makhoere highlights these typically feminine activities in No Child’s Play, where the women have a set time each day where they were expected to sit together and complete such tasks. The respective duties of male and female prisoners is only one area of difference: behavioural differences are equally marked. The different duties of the respective genders are externally imposed while behavioural differences are usually a matter of choice. For example, in One Hundred and Seventeen Days First reports plucking her eyebrows and filing her nails. These activities would certainly not be found in the account of a male’s prison experience. Although these details may seem rather trite in such a study, they must be noted for the sake of completeness as well as to highlight differences that make women’s prison literature unique. Other examples of overt differences in behaviour include massive hunger strikes and uniform protests that are more prevalent in women’s prison literature than that of men. Resistance against the prison system is far more evident in female prison literature. It could be argued that this obvious increase in resistance was as a direct result of the increase in resistance to apartheid, manifest on the ‘outside’. More and more women became involved in resistance movements as governmental policies became more discriminatory in nature and therefore with prison being a mirror
image of society as a whole, this resistance would necessarily be evident. “Reading what women have written and listening to them talk about their experiences, uncovers a clear, if sobering picture of the life that women lead behind bars. This is a picture that is not often exposed to the public gaze, particularly with stringent laws of what may and may not be published about the prison system” (Schreiner 1992: 6). The major difference between the writing of the male prisoners and that of the females is the emotional response of the female prisoners. In their writings we see how they are more willing to act than to complain. This development could be as a result of the worsening prison conditions – given the fact that the women are more contemporary authors. For First and many other prisoners, hunger strikes became a means to an end. The women realized that this was the only way by which to get attention and so used these strikes to their advantage. This is especially true in the case of Makhoere. Differences such as these add value to women’s prison literature, highlight the development that was taking place in the literature while confirming the fact that this voice must be heard.

One of the main differences between the writings of male and female prisoners is the way in which women reacted to and dealt with the hostile space. Traditionally the woman has been viewed as the homemaker and those authors for whom this might have been true must have been overwhelmed by the hostile space into which they were placed. However, once she accepted her changed circumstances, the woman would use this space as part of her resistance, a means by which to rebel, get attention and make changes within the prison system. Davies substantiates this point when he argues that

The subversiveness of women’s texts lies in quite other directions: the female tradition, deemed ‘particular’ because its authors apparently affirmed their personal conformity, ultimately shows how women exploited and manipulated prevailing social and criminological discourse to counter myths about women criminals. Women’s writing works in precisely the reverse direction, where the personal experiences may ultimately feed into a socio-political movement that emerges slowly out of gender conflicts. (Davies 1990: 53)
The best-known example of women’s prison literature is Ruth First’s account of her detention, *One Hundred and Seventeen Days*.

**RUTH FIRST**

First was born in Johannesburg in 1925 and became politically active while a student at the University of the Witwatersrand. After completing her studies she worked as a journalist and an academic. As a journalist she specialized in exposé reporting. She was constantly subjected to house searches and bannings. All this intensified when she married well-known communist Joe Slovo. First was arrested without trial in 1963. Her time in jail is detailed in her book *One Hundred and Seventeen Days*. After being exiled to Britain she returned to Africa to teach at a school in Mozambique. She was killed in 1982 by a letter bomb reputedly sent to her by South African agents (http://www.ex.ac.uk).

First suffered in her time in solitary confinement – so much so that she attempted to commit suicide. She spent two periods at Marshall Square. Like Bosman, she interweaves the story of her time in prison with those of the other women with whom she came into contact. She became aware not only of the ‘self’, but of the ‘other’ too. “She interweaves with her own story a number of other stories of political detainees … whose experience might otherwise have remained untold. By providing a framing narrative … it becomes a veritable archive of detention texts” (Jacobs 1991(c): 193).

First’s account is included in this study for a number of reasons. Firstly, in terms of chronology, she is the first white female prison-author to have written and published an account of her prison experience. Secondly, “First’s account of her solitary confinement without trial, her sense of being suspended in limbo, demoralized and dehumanized to the point of attempting to kill herself, makes a remarkable contribution to the body of literature detailing the psychological effects of detention. … *117 Days is*
more than just a highly individual record of unjust imprisonment; it becomes a veritable archive of detention texts” (Jacobs 1991(c): 198).

We see in First’s account how she, like her male contemporaries, suffered at the hand of the warders and jail officials. She was subjected to emotional, mental and physical abuse. The conditions of her everyday life were no better either: the food was bad, the treatment was bad and there were no privileges allowed. In such circumstances, time drags and this allows for introspection. “By day and by night I went over this self-exposure … I felt imaginably tired and dispirited. I could not cope any longer” (1982: 126). The title of her book itself suggests her constant awareness of time. As previously mentioned, time is not only a major theme in prison literature, as set out in the framework established by Herman Charles Bosman, but is also a focal point of every prisoner’s life. The fact that First uses the number of days that she spent in prison as the title of her novel both highlights and substantiates the suggestion that prisoners are constantly aware of time spent on the ‘inside’.

There is no need to recount in detail all the commonalities found in the literature of male and female prison-authors. Both male and female prison-authors experience violence, loss of identity, awareness of life, death, freedom and separation. Both genders are subject to maltreatment, bad food and poor living conditions. They are equally exposed to prison jargon, singing and laughter. “What is noticeable here [in women’s writing] is not the uncommonality of the experiences and the writing, but rather the commonplaceness of the experiences and the paucity of the writings. For women … have had to endure a triple damnation – as criminals, as women and as writers – and the writings that emerge have neither been ‘transcendental’ nor rebellious” (Davies 1990: 52). In South Africa, the damnation goes even further in the case of black, female political prisoners. When reading First, one must always bear in mind that her account is that of a white female political prisoner. Although prison literature is not primarily defined by the race of the prisoner concerned (the political reason for
incarceration is paramount), there were differences in the treatment of white and black prisoners.

We know all about that meeting at Rivonia. It was a meeting of picked people from all over the country. Mandela was there, and Sisulu. The pick of the bunch. You’re the only woman there … and you try to pretend that you know nothing of what happened, that you can’t remember, that nothing happened worth knowing. We know all about you … You can count your lucky stars that we still have respect for women in our country. You could have been charged in the Rivonia case. But we didn’t want a woman in that case. We still have some feeling for women. (First 1982: 120)

In First’s case the officer who was addressing her was specifically referring to white women. In an apartheid prison, there were very different rules and living standards for different races. First eats a different diet, has personal possessions, considers her cell “homely.” Her hostile space is more bearable than that of her black counterparts. No matter what colour or gender, all South African prison literature adheres, for the most part, to the characteristics of Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug*. Such a classification is both possible and necessary in order to group all these writings together as South African prison literature and to show that Herman Charles Bosman is without a doubt, the father of prison literature. What is important, however, is that there is clear development within the writing of female prisoners. First, a white, female political prisoner writes her experience from a hostile place where she was treated with some degree of respect. The vast differences between early prison literature and present-day apartheid prison literature when the voice of the female prisoner is begun to be heard, are found in the accounts of the non-white, female political prisoners (to be discussed later), where violence increases, prison conditions get worse and respect is almost non-existent.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, one of the differences found in the writing of female prisoners is the inclusion of their emotional responses. One such emotional reaction that can be found in the writing of the female prisoners has to do with death. Of course, death is a common feature in all prison writing: whether it be the death of a family member or a friend or the heightened awareness of death in the inmates’ everyday life, death is an
ever-present spectre. For the female prisoners, death could be the means by which to escape prison life and although this did present itself as a possibility to male prisoners as well, we saw earlier in the examination of male prison literature, that the authorities went to extreme measures to prevent suicide. None of the female authors make any mention of the removal of belts or shoelaces as a means by which to prevent suicide. In fact, if anything, women had vast access to instruments that could aid them in a suicide attempt – wool, knitting needles and iron chords. First writes about how she cannot go on – held without trial, maltreated, with little hope of a future. As a result of this loss of hope, due mainly to the fact that she had been betrayed, First attempts to commit suicide. “There is little evidence … of a will to dominate or possess; there is at best a sense of weakness inverted into irony or solitude glorified as martyrdom” (Davies 1990: 52). However true Davies’ statement may be, in the case of political prisoners, I believe that for the majority, the spirit of resistance instilled in their hearts was a far stronger force than momentary weaknesses when suicide might have been contemplated. In the writing of women, the sense of solidarity is blatant, and this, if nothing else would have prevented a woman from taking her own life.

When First regains her spirit and her determination to fight, she realizes that by not giving the security police a statement, which they could use in court, she had won: “That was all I thought the entire night: literally two words ‘NO STATEMENT NO STATEMENT’ over and over again in my mind” (1982: 130). “The introductory self-examination prior to her interrogation in Ruth First’s memoir signals the radical crisis of subjectivity that characterizes political detention and its eventual manipulation by the state penal apparatus, as it endeavors to realign an oppositional political position within its dominant ideological framework” (Harlow 1992: 147). This was done by ruthless and cruel interrogation of the prisoners. When a prisoner was able to resist answering questions and refused to give any information, they succeeded in ‘beating’ the system. It is victories like these
that we see throughout a prison account that adds hope to the existence of
the prison-author. We see this triumph in the writing of Sachs too, whereas
prison-authors like Breytenbach who simply wrote what he was instructed
to and Lewin who gave in after suffering extreme physical torture did not
share the same victory. Being able to withstand interrogation depended
solely on the mental and physical strength of each prisoner as an individual.
There is no rule found in this literature to be used as a guide to succeed in
resisting interrogation. This, in part, results in the uniqueness found in each
prison-author’s account.

I would like to suggest that another one of the elements of this novel
that makes it unique in relation to all the other prison literature dealt with in
this thesis is First’s treatment of sexuality. One of her interrogators, by the
name of Viktor, is attracted to her. First’s daughter Gillian, in her book,
Every Secret Thing: My Family, My Country, states that it was “the
romantic coup of the decade … a gaoler who had fallen in love with a
beautiful communist.” He brings First perfume and even asks about her
sleepwear. “One of the most remarkable achievements of 117 Days is its
acknowledgement of sexuality, even though it is quite clear that First as
narrator is attempting to reconstruct the contradictions of the relationship”
(Schalkwyk 2001: 16). Although this attraction on the part of the
interrogator can be favourably compared to Pym’s attraction to Bosman in
Cold Stone Jug, the uniqueness comes about because of the fact that
someone of power fell in love with a prisoner, an aspect not found in any
other of the prison literature under examination.

First’s prison account is indeed vital because, in the words of her
husband, Joe Slovo, it will continue to have relevance for future generations
as “it is a part of the inspiration which will inevitably lead to a society of
justice and harmony … it is a chronicle of signal bravery” (Chapman 1996:
246).
Emma Mashinini

Emma Mashinini was born on 21 August 1929 in Rossettenville, a suburb of Johannesburg. She spent a great deal of her childhood moving, as more and more areas were proclaimed ‘white only.’ As a result of the financial hardship caused by the divorce of her parents, Mashinini was forced to leave school before completing her Junior Certificate. Mashinini became involved in strikes from the early 1950s when the working conditions for black women, which were abysmal from the start of her working life, worsened. Her involvement with trade unions continued and intensified when she was elected into positions of power within the various organizations to which she belonged. She was arrested in November 1981 and was detained under Section 22 (Strikes Have Followed Me all My Life 1989: preface).

Mashinini’s writing is regarded as an autobiography tracing her life from her birth in 1929. The focal point of the text is from the 1960s when she began to work as an activist to her arrest in 1981. “Mashinini places herself at the centre of ‘the community’ to derive the moral authority to speak for herself and on behalf of others who share her sense of community” (Thale 2000: 164). She spends a great deal of time documenting her time in prison. In writing this autobiography, Mashinini shows how she finds an identity for herself in activism. “Mashinini’s recollection of her life pivots around three crucial determinants: work, activism and imprisonment” (Thale 2000: 164).

Why this writing is unique and included in this study is mainly because of the fact that there are as yet few autobiographies by black South African women because of all the oppressive measures put in place by the apartheid government. Therefore, the fact that Mashinini wrote and published an autobiography mainly focusing on her imprisonment makes this a very valuable piece of literature. “…for Ellen Kuzwayo and for Emma Mashinini to have written their life-stories and for them to have done so in English,
one of the languages of their oppressors, is in itself a triumph” (Daymond 1993: 25).

Mashinini shares the other authors’ awareness of time, of self and of death. She suffers the same abuse and follows the same arduous daily routine of everyday prison life. For Mashinini, death was her greatest fear and when, after her arrest, she realizes that she has been transported to Pretoria Central Prison, she is completely overwhelmed, “because to me, Pretoria Central Prison was a place for people who have been sentenced to death” (1989: 54). Death comes to Mashinini in many forms. When she arrives at Pretoria Central Prison and is literally stripped bare, she feels, at that moment, that her humanity has died. In losing her humanity, Mashinini, like all prison-authors, becomes newly aware of ‘I’ – of the self.

Like Bosman, the lack of human contact for Mashinini causes a slight dementia, of which she becomes aware when she realizes that she can no longer remember her daughter’s name. This loss of memory is yet another death for her. Her madness, as a result of her imprisonment and long periods of isolation, was not imagined. She was completely cut off from her world in solitary confinement and writes: “I had spent so much time with white police, surrounded by white people. It was a white woman who had refused me chewing-gum, and a white woman who had put those bracelets on me” (1989: 92) After her release, Mashinini was treated in a Danish clinic for victims of torture and detention.

In prison, the lack of contact with others was a means by which the security police tried to ‘break’ the prisoners, who would then confess. Mashinini records that she actually looks forward to her interrogation sessions simply because she is able to have a conversation. “These outings – to the doctor, to the interrogation, to my visitors – served a very good purpose, because it was going out to meet people, to see other things and most of all people. Even interrogation I looked forward to. And if they didn’t call me for interrogation, I really wanted to remind them, because
interrogation was better than to be isolated and all by myself for months” (1989: 85).

Another important similarity between Mashinini’s writing and that of other prison-authors is the theme of writing itself. Mashinini too experiences being forced into written confessions, but she sees most of her writing as a means by which she has some control. “I would sit and write, and write. And this was better for me. Maybe it was a way of being able to think what to say without for once anyone pushing me and going on – ‘Come on, come on, now. Speak.’ And being rough about it” (1989: 76).

The greatest difference between the literature of black female and white female prisoners is the awareness of each other in prison. Schalkwyk writes, “Middleton openly acknowledges her distance from black women … First, is not only distanced from black prisoners by her satirical eye and her merely ironical description of herself as a white ‘madam’. Mashinini on the other hand experiences the overwhelming presence of whites as an unbearable intensification of her imprisonment and suffering” (Schalkwyk 2001: 23). This sort of overt commentary about racial differences emerges for the first time in the writings of Mashinini, and this points to the intensification of the struggle both in and outside the prison: The mid-1980s saw a hardening of the lines between the races under P. W. Botha’s State of Emergency. As racial discrimination heightened on the outside, so racial differences and awareness thereof increased on the ‘inside.’ “But I was so glad – on my God, I was so glad to see a black person, even a black police person. I was so sick of seeing those white people … It was no privilege to be among them. It was a misery and deprivation” (Mashinini 1989: 24). For the black female political prisoner, the hostile space had a colour dimension – it was all white.

Mashinini sees all the privileges bestowed upon the white prisoners and this heightens her bitterness and anger. She desires the same food, clothing, and, more importantly respect. This should not be regarded as a racist stance. Thale remarks: “her moral outrage here is directed at everything
white. Whiteness becomes a symbol of moral decadence, while blackness represents the forces of good – the source of her moral strength. The racialisation of Mashinini’s representation of prison experience stands in contrast to her emphasis on non-racialism in the rest of her autobiography” (2000: 174).

Although Mashinini’s book is not restricted to her incarceration, it is included in this study because she writes (as a prisoner) of her personal prison experience. Her writing about her prison experience forms a substantive and influential aspect of her work and colours what comes before and after. This is important to note because of the limitation set in this thesis that only biographies that deal substantially with prison life will be examined in this study. Mashinini uses the same number of pages (thirty-seven) to detail her imprisonment and her career whereas she only uses ten pages to narrate the first twenty-seven years of her life. “It is instructive to consider Mashinini’s other reason for writing the autobiography, since she ostensibly wrote the book to alert future detainees to the conditions of detention. The autobiography was therefore conceived of in functional terms” (Thale 2000: 165). She writes of her life outside of prison as being full of forced structures which “systematically resemble those of the penitentiary” (Schalkwyk 2001: 23). She says that apartheid South Africa was structured as a prison for black women.

We should regard Mashinini’s book as an important contribution to South African prison literature because of the deep spirit of resistance evidenced in her writing. It is her resistance that clearly manifests a marked development in prison literature through the years. It also shows a revolution in terms of prison-authors themselves – a move from an exclusively male domain in the sixties and seventies to writing that includes white and black female prison experiences too. “She portrays herself as a resilient woman who survives the harsh treatment she suffered in prison” (Thale 2000: 175).
Caesarina Kona Makhoere

Makhoere was born in 1955 and became involved in politics from a young age. She was active in the black students’ resistance to Bantu Education in 1976, and as a result was imprisoned for six years. Makhoere was detained in October 1976, after her father, who was a policeman, revealed her hiding place to the security forces. This facet of her arrest is completely unlike that of the other prison-authors’. But what is even more remarkable is Makhoere’s reaction to the part her father played in her arrest and subsequent imprisonment. “Makhoere is also profoundly ambivalent about her father’s part in her arrest. How does one justify the fact that Makhoere’s own father betrayed her to the police…?” (Gititi 1991: 49). It was only a year later she was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment. “Even today I don’t really blame him for everything that happened to me. He never deliberately tried to hurt me or my mother. He was trapped and could not help pointing out where I was hiding when I was on the run” (Makhoere 1988: 1).

After her release Makhoere published No Child's Play: In Prison Under Apartheid, a memoir of her prison experience. Like all prison literature examined in this study, it shares many similarities with the writing of Bosman and those who wrote after him. What then makes this particular prison narrative unique, and worthy of inclusion in this study? The answer to this is succinctly summed up by Gititi when saying: “it is remarkable for its articulation of anger, its probing of the daily experience of apartheid in the confined space of prison and courtroom, and for its zeroing in on the brutalization in prison of women as a specific category whose experiences are often not documented with such clear focus and attention to the process of physical and psychological degradation” (1991: 43). Gititi refers to this prison experience as a ‘testimonial document’, one that “helps us to understand relations of domination and resistance as played out in the bitter drama of popular insurgency” (1991: 43). Referring to this piece as
‘testimonial’ is yet another quality not mentioned before with regard to other prison literature making Makhoere’s work exclusive in this regard too. Another unique factor about this novel is the fact that it documents a vital historical happening in South African history – the 1976 Soweto uprising.

Makhoere’s writing differs from that of Mashinini’s in that Makhoere refuses to give power to those by whom she is imprisoned. In a spirit of defiant perverseness, she turns things around and believes that all the jailers and warders begin a sentence with her. In taking this view, she alters the accepted power base traditionally operating in this hostile space, a space that at this stage in the history of South African prisons has accepted stereotypical power roles – the wardens and prison officials have the power to which the prisoners must necessarily submit. She is connecting herself with all those with whom she comes into contact, and develops a relationship of mutuality rather than power.

We know what we want. Ours is just a struggle – the people shall govern. We have learned to share, here we have nothing; we have learned to build each other up, to give each other strength. We know our demands – the Freedom Charter demands. We know what we must do to live above all as human beings. Our future South Africa is being hammered out in our struggle today. (Makhoere 1988: 121)

As a result of these altered power relations, Makhoere’s prison experience differs considerably from those already examined. The theme that runs through her novel is one of resistance. Her entire imprisonment is filled with various forms of resistance – against the system and various individuals. Makhoere refuses to eat, to parade, to wear prison clothing, to iron and to go to church, among many other things. Harlow refers to this resistance as organized protest that “challenged the institutional forms that conscript their identity as women with minds of their own and asserting a radical critique of the state and its politics” (Harlow 1992: 155). The theme of resistance develops in the writing of the political prisoners in contrast to that of apolitical prisoners like Bosman. Bosman ‘resisted’ in a more fundamental way. His protest (and he did protest) was founded on humane principles: he believed that incarceration was crushing of the human spirit
and that it said a great deal about the punitive and uncaring attitude of the society outside. Although this also forms an important part of the resistance of political prisoners, they are resisting a greater force than just the prison system. Political prisoners are incarcerated because of their initial resistance against the government. The prison and everything that takes place within the prison becomes yet another symbol of the government and all its discriminatory policies. Thus these prisoners are resisting apartheid, the government and its segregational institutions, one of which is the prison.

The tone of the entire book is very bitter: “… we do not live in the daydreams of these apartheid gods. We are the people locked up in prison, under these unjust and horrible conditions” (Makhoere 1988: 28). Although we do see moments of weakness, Makhoere’s narration is, for the most part, very firm and self-confident – she was not going to let the system break her. On the issue of Bantu Education she states that “The introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction by the architects of Bantu education was like putting salt on an already existing wound. Was it not enough to let us swallow the poisonous education they were pushing down our throats? All this is done with the blessing of the government, which has the audacity to decide what it thinks is good and bad for us” (1988: 4). This statement illustrates how she perceived apartheid’s fundamental contradictions: that it professed to be to everyone’s ultimate benefit – that all peoples in SA could achieve full development along their own lines – but that it, of course, would not really allow this to happen. Really allowing people to develop to their full potential would have been far too dangerous for the apartheid government. As long as the white man’s educational standards were superior to that of the blacks’, the government believed that they would always remain in a superior position. Thus it was not in the best interests of the white government to allow the black man to develop and reach his full potential. Makhoere realizes this and sees how enforcing substandard Bantu education was a deliberate ploy on the part of the government.
We cannot call it normal. This system is sick. People are sleeping in ditches, sleeping in trees in their own country, their own motherland. … Where is the security? Where is the comfort today? This evil system has made our lives a pitiful thing. And until South Africa is in the hands of the people, not the minority, nothing will come right. Until the people shall govern our people will still be sleeping in ditches, in trees. It is for the people of South Africa to remove all these terrible things. It is our duty. (Makhoere 1988: 118)

In the novel, she spends a great deal of time recording the stories of the other women imprisoned with her and how they were broken, both mentality and physically. Watching this on a daily basis clearly strengthened Makhoere’s resolve to remain strong. The fact that Makhoere records the stories of others demonstrates the similarity between her work and those of other prison-writers – especially Bosman. She had an awareness of others and the world around her. “The consciousness of a group identity is ultimately a function of collective memory, and the means by which such a memory is kept alive, renewed, modified, co-memorated” (Gititi 1991: 44).

Makhoere mentions that life in prison is difficult and that one has to be strong to endure it. This is a sentiment shared by all prison-authors. This resolve was not easy to maintain as she records her physical abuse at the hands of the warders, her poor health as a result of the poor living conditions and the many hunger strikes that she organized in an attempt to change the prison conditions of black female prisoners. Here she is including the common characteristic of sociological elements of imprisonment. She writes: “In prison you reach a stage where you are scraped raw, where your emotions ride on your back” (1988: 58).

Makhoere, like Bosman and many of the other prison-authors, writes about the singing that took place in prison. This provided inner strength for all the prisoners. “Singing helps keep people sane” (1988: 97). What added to her delight was the fact that singing was not permitted and yet they continually got away with it. Singing and music are one of the many common characteristics of prison literature found in No Child’s Play. Singing often became the only form of communication between prisoners.
The policy of the prisons was to keep the political prisoners apart so that they would weaken in their isolation. But at night, the singing of revolutionary songs like “Ayoza nazo” not only united these women but confirmed for them that there were other comrades in jail too. “Singing in prison becomes another transformative metaphor in Makhoere’s text. Much more than a token of resistance, it is a sign of her personhood, a means of communication, the sound of solidarity, and a message of hope. … Her singing brings down, symbolically, the walls of the prison” (Ryan 1993: 66).

A significant difference that can be seen is this novel, apart from Makhoere’s personal strength, is her awareness of the strength and solidarity of women. First and Mashinini do not spend the same amount of time detailing this fact or encouraging the other women in jail with them to find their own inner strength and unite in terms of their rights and respective political beliefs. “The pillars of the struggle have always been the women” (Makhoere 1988: 18). As was mentioned earlier, this is not a study in feminism, but Makhoere’s obsession with the power of the women is a major theme in this book and a large part of her personal prison experience and must therefore be noted.

Makhoere’s prison diary foregrounds the female body as it exists in the preliberation moment: as a commodity of exchange, as a source of free labor (in particular on prison farms), as the degraded, de-sexed object of the programme of apartheid, as the subjugated materia of male patriarchy. But Makhoere clearly recognises the tough tasks ahead for women who have to wage political war against the common enemy as well as against injustice of all kinds. (Gititi 1991: 46)

This obsession with female resistance is also a strong indication of the development of women’s prison writings. The growing strength of the women incarcerated and the worsening conditions of the South African prison system in terms of the treatment of political prisoners, especially those who were non-white are all developments that can be linked with the growing politicization in South Africa.

One cannot assume that because Makhoere resisted so violently any similarities between her writing and the writings of other prison-authors are
totally negated. She still includes the prison diction, experiences the poor living conditions, refers to laws and is abused. These issues, however, are not the focus of her book. The fact that they are included shows that no matter how one’s prison experience differs from that of someone else, or how individual authors perceive and record their experience, the common characteristics of prison literature are still evident. “The ‘I’ of Makhoere’s narrative is a different signifier from the ‘I’ of First’s. Each ‘I’ brings different rewards, explores different terrains, is able to withstand different pressures, and is liable to withstand different pressures, and is liable to be complex with very different structures” (Schalkwyk 2001: 35–36). It is this very fact that makes each account unique and noteworthy in a study such as this. The various ‘I’s in the writing by women prison-authors, while sharing many common identities, differ in terms of the unity found among the female political prisoners. For Makhoere, the ‘I’ becomes symbolic for all female comrades fighting against apartheid. “When I came out, I knew I had a lot to do. Outside I would be telling the comrades we had to start organizing ourselves. That the seeds of revolution have bloomed… we have to carry the flag of the sisters high” (Makhoere 1988:18).

This text is also unique in terms of this study because of the focus of her narrative. Schalkwyk summarizes this when he says: “Makhoere makes no attempt to convey the pressure of prison time through language; time, the very substance of the isolated and detained consciousness in other memoirs, is virtually absent in No Child’s Play” (Schalkwyk 2001: 31). Her account of her actual experience in confinement is merely perfunctory. She records her daily routine, the meals, prison rules and all other facets expected to be found in a memoir about a prison experience. These prison ‘norms’ do not become the focal point of her writing as is often the case of Mashinini who writes detailed accounts of hunger strikes and resistance to other prison routines. As is seen in the above discussion about this book, Makhoere chronicles her emotions and her actions rather than an introspective view of ‘self.’ This example of prison literature must be considered as one of the
most bitter and angry ever written. She herself says, “The anger, the hatred
was building. It affected my mind” (1988: 72). But we must note that: “in
spite of the anger, Makhoere’s true vision of a future South Africa is one
cleansed of violence and vengeance” (Gititi 1991: 47).

I personally think that blacks in South Africa have all the right
to hate, but because we are human we have to live together in peace –
we must work together. We can only do that when we get rid of the
evil system of apartheid, totally and forever. (Makhoere 1988: 98)

Women have been the silenced voices within the South African prison
system. If these writings by women were not included in this study, this
would represent yet another marginalization of women in a male-dominated
society. Prison ‘society’ has always been male-dominated and that explains
the wealth of literature by male prison-authors. I believe that it is important
to know what it was like to be a woman in a South African prison. We have
examined some of the literature available, seen the similarities and also
noted the many differences. “In the same way, the human strength of
women and men, their determination to fight all physical, moral and mental
oppression, the contents and form of their struggle are also very similar”
(Schreiner 1992: 9). Arona Dison, a prison-author who was detained for 15
days, captures the essence of this entire chapter in her prison poem entitled
“Pollsmoor, 15 July, 1986”

A pen is a dangerous weapon
You may not have one in your cell
here in Pollsmoor
where the white woman detainees
are treated oh-so-well
by South African standards

After supper – around three-thirty
the depression from the realization
that you’ll soon be locked in
for the night
starts sinking in

And locked in your cell
you hear women screaming
– you can’t take it any more
and later they calm down
and sing
songs of freedom
but we
the white women
don’t know the words
don’t want to lose the slight rights and privileges
that we have
(for detainees may not sing or whistle or …etc.)

And we lie and listen
to the other dangerous,
locked away, sonder trial, sonder lawyer
detainees
singing
‘let there be love spread amongst us…
…Nkosi Yam – My God’

(Dison IN Schreiner 1992: 167–168)
CONCLUSION

One of the principal aims of this thesis was to provide a comprehensive survey of South African prison literature – something that has thus far not been undertaken. This survey took the form of providing a historical background to South African prisons (Chapter One), listing and briefly explaining both the primary and secondary sources available on this topic (Chapter Two), providing a set of characteristics common to this collection of writing (Chapter Three) and providing a theoretical approach to this material (Chapter Four). The primary literary material was then reviewed – the prison writings themselves (Chapters Five to Nine).

It was necessary to offer a theoretical approach to this material in order to provide a lens through which this literature can be read. The reading of literature is indubitably a subjective act: each reader brings his or her own context to the text that is being examined. As Eagleton has argued, “all literary works … are ‘rewritten’, if only unconsciously, by the societies which read them; indeed there is no reading of a work which is not also a ‘re-writing’” (1996: 11). This is certainly true of prison literature and becomes even more complicated in a country such as South Africa. The white activist and the African militant, say, who lived through the apartheid era would probably read and ‘rewrite’ this literature in a broadly similar manner, and theirs would be a reading that would be completely different, for example, from those who still believe in apartheid – or, indeed, the younger reader who never experienced this time in history. “No work, and no current evaluation of it, can simply be extended to new groups of people without being changed, perhaps almost unrecognizably, in the process, and this is one reason why what counts as literature is a notably unstable affair” (Eagleton 1996: 11). The ‘instability’ of which Eagleton writes can be ameliorated to some extent, however, by adopting a theoretical approach to the disparate texts examined, and also to ‘declare’ such an approach openly and explicitly. This does not mean that an ‘objective’ reading of any of
these texts has been provided, but it does make explicit my assumptions and principles in approaching the corpus of writing at the centre of this study. As Barry observes, “any claim to offer a definitive reading would be futile. The meanings within a literary work are never fixed and reliable, but always shifting, multi-faceted and ambiguous” (Barry 1995: 35).

The theoretical positions adopted in this thesis offer a number of valuable insights. Before examining these, with specific reference to this body of literature, some general comments on literary theory as a whole are perhaps necessary. Why have I adopted a theoretical approach in this study, when it is widely agreed that literary theory is abstract and “does not offer a method for approaching literary texts directly” (Rice 1998: 2)? In his introduction to Modern Literary Theory (1996), Rice answers this question. “The task of literature is to render life, experience and emotion in a potent way; the job of criticism is to reveal the true value and meaning of the rendition – a rendition at once contained in the literary work and yet, paradoxically, needing the critical act to reveal it” (1998: 2). When deciding upon this particular literature as the focus for this study, I realized how little value has been accorded to these writings. In some ways, prison literature has proven to be more revelatory about life in and about South African society, than the literature written on the ‘outside’. It is to be hoped that in the future the “true value and meaning” will be bestowed upon South African prison literature. No collection of work could render “life, experience and emotion” more potently than prison literature written from the personal prison experiences of the author. Therefore in reading these texts critically, and applying various theories to the writings, valuable insights must be gained. Barry summarizes the insights provided by literary theory by saying that there are two tracks in literary theory: one provides a close reading of the literature while the other tackles general issues concerned with the literature. The latter includes “how are literary works structured? How do they affect readers or audiences? What is the nature of the literary language? How does literature relate to the contemporary and to
matters of politics and gender? What can be said about literature from a philosophical point of view? What is the nature of the act of literary composition?” (Barry 1995: 26). It is by examining these (and other) issues that insight into South African prison literature is gained.

In Chapter Three I utilized a number of theoretical positions to yield some principles of classification and a consistency of approach to what would otherwise be a fairly disparate array of texts. This was continued in Chapter Four with a detailed and specific focus on the work of Michel Foucault. In order to gain insight into this or any collection of literature, it is necessary to begin, as is suggested above by Barry (1995), with a close reading of the text/s. I discovered that a number of theoretical approaches would aid the deeper understanding of these texts.

Existentialism, as discussed in Chapter Three, is a dimension common to most twentieth-century literature. As a body of philosophy, it attempts to explain the meaning of our existence in the world. In relation to prison literature, existentialism can be used to gain insight into the meaning of the prisoners’ existence in their world – the hostile space of prison. New Historicism, which emerged in America in the 1980s, suggests that literary works should be read together with historiographical accounts relevant to the specific literary texts. Thus an important dimension to New Historicism is its value as a textual practice. It is one of the most valuable theoretical approaches to prison literature because most prison literature is synonymous with political literature and thus the reading of these literary texts can only be enhanced when read alongside relevant historical texts. The fact that New Historicism gives both texts equal value shows how important the context of prison literature is. This theory takes “a holistic approach to literature aiming to integrate literary and historical study…” (Barry 1995: 33). Stylistics, a more practical theory, examines the workings of the technical features of the language used in literary texts. The insights gained when applying this theory to prison literature include the understanding of prison jargon, the political affiliations of the prison-authors through the
language they use and to what and whom they were exposed through examining the diction and grammatical structures of their writings. These theories deal with the structure and nature of the works, their readers and their relation to contemporary matters such as politics and gender. These are the issues that Barry says literary theory should deal with (as listed above). He also includes the issue of a philosophical point of view, which, in the case of prison literature, is adequately provided by the work of Michel Foucault.

Foucault primarily analyzes power and knowledge. Rice (1998) argues that it is this insight provided by Foucault that led to critical practices like New Historicism. Without repeating what has already been noted in Chapter Four, it is worth emphasizing here that Foucault’s notion of a prison as a place primarily established for punishment – a form of punishment that involves the supervision and organization of bodies in time and space – is invaluable to this study. In this thesis I have constantly alluded to the space referred to by Foucault, and this insight provides one of the most important links for the writings examined here. But what is this hostile space? This hostile space can be both literal and figurative. The space in which the prisoner finds himself, in the literal sense, is the prison. In Chapter Three of his book *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault expounds on the formation of this space, basing his notions on Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon theory (as was discussed in Chapter Four).

Cells are closed off on three sides, the opening on the fourth side being for the benefit only of the prison staff and not the prisoner him/herself. Being caged in, so to speak, creates a hostile space in which the prisoner is forced to live – hostile mainly because of the fact that men are born to be free and therefore being imprisoned goes against the innate way of life. The famous quote by Jean Jacques Rousseau is particularly apt here: “Man was born free and now is everywhere in chains” (http://a1-famous-quotes.com). The hostile space can get worse. The prisoners on death row are not given the opportunity actually to emerge from the cell, while those in solitary are
often locked in a cell closed in on all four sides. Foucault argues that the creation of this hostile space serves to “induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (1977: 200). Prison writing was a form of resistance to this “automatic functioning of power” – an attempt to invert the hierarchy of power. The hostile space that forces power over the prisoner naturally leads to resistance on the prisoner’s part – particularly in the case of those who have fought a political struggle against what they see as the illegitimate wielding of this power. Resistance for these prisoners comes in the form of writing – writing in and about their hostile space. In his *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, Breytenbach writes that his cell “could not have been much larger than six feet: I could barely brush the walls with my arms outstretched. In length it must have been about nine feet. But what it lacked in floor space it made up in depth: it was a good five metres high, with an open space for the last two metres, blocked off from the catwalk by a wire mesh…” (1984: 123). The height was not to provide a sense of space (airiness) for the prisoner, but to provide visibility – and to induce in the prisoner an oppressive sense of being under relentless observation. A similar hostile space is described in Cronin’s poetry:

Overhead is mesh  
To one side the morgue  
To one side the gallows wings, this  
Is our yard  
Into which a raggedy  
By happenstance  
Butterfly has flown.

(1983: 4)

Chapter Five provided a close examination of Bosman’s *Cold Stone Jug*, and demonstrated just how seminal this text is – that Bosman, in other words, is deservedly known as the ‘Father of South African Prison Literature.’ One of the most important arguments developed in this regard is that the common characteristics that can be identified in this literature developed from the work of Herman Charles Bosman. The literature survey
(Chapter Two) indicated that there is no other well-known example of such literature before *Cold Stone Jug*, so this landmark text provides a starting point for this study. As previously mentioned, Cronin states that there are “tinges of Bosman in, say, Breytenbach … also to an extent in … *Bandiet* … I certainly read Brutus attentively before I went in, and had remembered his poems … I was aware of following in his footsteps. [From Brutus I] learnt that one could write an extended book of lyrical poetry out of prison experience … if Lewin could have wrung words from the stone and concrete then so could I” (quoted in Folli 1994: 99). This statement suggests that the features of prison literature developed by Bosman weave their way throughout the corpus of South African prison literature. As stated on numerous occasions in this study, not all of the characteristics found in Bosman are found in all prison literature written in South Africa, but a significant number of them thread their way through the individual works examined in the various chapters of this study.

However, it cannot be argued that Bosman had a *direct* influence on all the authors of prison literature; there is no evidence to substantiate such a claim. If this were the case, it could be argued that he provided a template to which all subsequent prison literature conformed – suggesting that nothing ‘new’ has been done after him. This is suggested by Roberts, who states, “it seems to me that prison literature might be more vulnerable to cliché than other kinds because of the very circumscription of the prison environment” (1985: 65). As Roberts succinctly points out, the environment that the prison-authors write in and about lends itself to marked and pervasive similarities. It is, however, necessary to state that this environment is also what makes this literature so completely different from any other body of writing.

The starting point of this literature is the prison, a place that I have termed a hostile space. Perhaps the most important (and obvious) point to make is that the *place* in which prison writing takes place is unusual. In other words, it is unusual for writers to be so severely constrained as
regards the immediate surroundings and circumstances in which they write. Although over the course of human history a large body of writings has emanated from people suffering various forms of incarceration (confinement to a mediaeval dungeon, abandonment on a penal colony, or incarceration in a prison-of-war camp, a labour camp, a psychiatric institution, a conventional prison . . .), it remains true that this body of writing is small relative to the corpus of literature generated under ‘normal’ conditions.

A related point is that such constrained conditions make an impact on the themes and texture of the writing itself: confinement, lack of liberty, the conformity imposed on prisoners, the dull routine, the institutionalized food, clothing and practices – all of these factors inevitably make their deep impress on the writing itself. (This of course makes assessing the extent of Bosman’s influence all the more difficult: is it his literary example or the prison conditions themselves – which in many respects are unvarying over time – that weigh most heavily?)

The point, then, is that the literature spawned in the constrained and artificial world of the prison is set apart from the literature produced under ‘normal’ conditions. Prison literature, therefore, in comparison with other literatures, is ‘unnatural.’ People are taken out of society and placed in an artificial environment, and the point of origin of this literature is therefore in many ways ‘artificial.’ The writing that comes out of this environment can then be regarded as being reactive in nature – written as a direct result of imprisonment. We arrive then at a point where the very beginnings of this literature are different and in order to develop a solid argument about this literature, one is forced to make a close examination of the differences found in such a comparative examination rather than the similarities.

This is where Chapters Six to Nine of the thesis come in. I have shown that there are as many similarities as differences among the works examined. These differences suggest that there is a development in this writing and it is my aim to argue that the development that can be traced in
South African prison literature comes about as a direct result of the increasing politicization of the country and, therefore, of the literature. This statement refers specifically to the prison literature written during the rule of the National Party apartheid government (1948–1994). Prison literature in South Africa is often regarded as being synonymous with political literature. However, in tracing its origins as has been done in this study, it can be seen that, ironically, prison literature had its beginnings and foundation in an apolitical novel, written before the era of ‘high apartheid’ proper.

A comparative analysis of works belonging to the corpus of South African prison literature becomes a study of difference within commonality. Unlike literature produced in ‘normal’ situations, prison writings have a common point of origin – put simply, they are all written under and in reaction to a range of similar circumstances (the most important of which have been discussed in this study). This provides them with a common point of departure, and the fascination (under such artificial, ‘laboratory’-like conditions) is to assess how differently various writers have responded to these similar conditions. One of the most important sets of differences relates to genre: South African prison-authors have chosen a wide range of literary forms in which to give expression to their thoughts and feelings – the autobiographical novel, poetry, diaries and letters . . . . For the critic of prison literature, then, it becomes important to analyze how these various generic forms throw different light on the same (or similar) set of conditions. There is no evidence to suggest that there is a consistent pattern of development in terms of the genre chosen by each individual prison-author. It also cannot be argued that the genre selected by each prison-author is directly related to the increasing politicization of South Africa. We must then accept that this difference can only be explained in terms of personal choice on the part of each prison-author. Bosman and Breytenbach were novelists before writing about their imprisonment and thus one would expect this to influence their choice of genre. At the beginning of each
It is important at this point to sum up how each genre not only differs from the others, but also offers a unique perspective on this collection of writing. The novel, as was shown in Chapter Six, is the most difficult to classify. Its differences from the other genres include: the length of the writing, the details provided and the inclusion of ‘faction.’ The novel is unique in terms of prison literature firstly because of the historiographical value it offers, which in turn provides documentary value. Poetry, on the other hand, is obviously a much shorter rendition of a prison experience. The mode of address of a poem is a point of difference, too. The poet often writes a poem to or for someone, whereas the novelist is more likely to write for a larger audience. Another point of difference is the lack of detailed historicity in a poem. The novel has the scope in which to write about laws, governmental regulations and general political happenings. A poem is not written on the same scale. Poetry is far more microscopic in nature – examining a specific happening, person or time period in minute detail, whereas the novel examines many issues more generally. The fact that the poet deals with small, private moments enables him or her to bring a greater intensity of vision to bear on his subject matter, something not usually afforded to the prison novelist. This personal tone is intensified in the writing of letters and diaries, as is the focus in terms of mode of address. The writer of a letter is most specific in terms of who the audience of his or her letter will be. The diarist’s focus is more explicit where a diary is usually written for the use of one individual only; the writer himself. The personal tone of letters and diaries offers a perspective not seen in other genres; it provides a valuable insight into the personal life of the prison-author. The uniqueness of the letter lies in the fact that it was and often still is used as the only means of communication in the prison and as a result became public property. The letter is the only genre that was openly subjected to various degrees of censorship by the prison authorities, and
was written within a certain framework. Prison authorities prescribed the length and content of this writing. Although some novels and poems were censored or even banned by the government, this only occurred upon publication, whereas letters were censored or destroyed on a daily basis before the intended recipient had the chance to read them. We read how Cronin memorized some of his poems – for fear of precisely the same happening. The rules regarding the writing of letters did develop alongside the increasing politicization of the country. The letters written by Bosman, an apolitical prisoner, would not have been subjected to the intense scrutiny experienced by letter writers in the 1980s, simply because it was unlikely that the content of a letter written by an apolitical prisoner could be of much danger to the government. Conversely, the content of a political prisoner’s letter could have contained any number of problematic and questionable issues and therefore was censored very carefully.

Despite all the rules and regulations, the epistolary form was and probably still is the most common form of prison writing – so much so, that Gready’s assertion as stated in Chapter Eight bears repeating here. He shows the significance of the letter to a study of literature when he says, “the letter was the most important written means through which a symbolic transformation of, and transportation between, worlds, and forms of the written word, could be achieved” (1993: 497). Breytenbach, as stated in Chapter Eight, says that he puts himself in a letter. This statement clearly illustrates what Gready is stating above. In the writing and receiving of a letter, the prisoner moves out of his limited world on the ‘inside’ and receives a glimpse of the ‘outside’. Thus the prisoner is transported from the world of incarceration, separation and loneliness to that world for which he longs – symbolizing his freedom. Thus we can see that through all the noticeable differences and unique perspectives offered by prison letters, that they are not merely a rendering of the prison novel or prison poem written in a different format. The same is true of the prison diary. This is the genre written in the most highly personal and intimate voice. In most cases, the
writer of the prison diary is writing for himself. The diarist, too, is forced to hide his or her writing from prison authorities so that it would not be censored or destroyed. The diarist, like the prison novelist, could also include a global view of his prison experience, comparable to the prison poem in terms of the personal and emotional content because of the focus of a personal audience and as a result offering a unique perspective to prison literature in terms of its mode of address.

Despite the overt differences in genre as discussed above, the developments in the literature are manifest in a number of areas. What has become evident in the course of this comparative analysis is that, by examining the history of imprisonment, the focus of the literature, the content – with specific reference to narration and diction – the idea of punishment and the gender of the prison-authors, it will be seen how prison literature has not only developed, but that this development must be regarded as a direct result of politicization.

Increasing politicization occurred on many levels during the period under examination. As already mentioned, as the country became increasingly politicized, so did the literature. On other levels one has to bear in mind that individuals as well as resistance groups existing at the time also became increasingly politicized or, at the very least, developed a heightened awareness of the highly political atmosphere in South Africa. “Like the Sharpeville shootings of 21 March 1960, the Soweto shootings of 16 June 1976 were followed by the spreading of political conflict to other centers in the country. But unlike 1960, the conflict developed on a far larger scale” (Nuttall 1998: 107).

In order to illustrate the effect politics had on prison literature over time, we must necessarily examine the literature together with the history of the country in chronological order. Another way of looking at this corpus of works is to examine them diachronically – to assess, in other words, what kind of historical development can be discerned. Perhaps unsurprisingly, an analysis of this sort reveals an increasing politicization of prison writing
that shadows the increasing politicization of wider South African society between the late 1920s (when Bosman was imprisoned) and late 1980s (when the Robben Island prisoners were being released).

Bosman was imprisoned in 1926. At this time in history the Pact Government was in power and, as he was not a political prisoner, the government in power did not directly influence Bosman’s work. The first of the prison-authors to be imprisoned under the apartheid regime was Albie Sachs, who was initially detained under the Ninety-day law in 1952. At the time of his initial detainment, the Suppression of Communism Act (1950) was in place. This Act defined communism in very broad terms, giving the government power to imprison anyone who was deemed to be working against it. “The Act became a weapon for attempting to silence resistance” (Nuttall 1998: 38). Sachs was imprisoned again in 1963, as were Brutus, Kathrada and First. They were all accused of sabotage and incarcerated under the General Law Amendment Act of 1963 that formalized the Ninety-day law. This Act was rewritten in 1965 to allow suspects to be held for a period of 180 days without being charged or brought to trial. Lewin, imprisoned in 1966, suffered the same fate. In 1967 the government passed the Terrorism Act that allowed heavy sentences to be imposed on anyone found to be working against the government. This included the death sentence. Breytenbach (1975), Cronin (1976), Makhoere (1976) and Mashinini (1981) were all charged under this Act. The facts provided here make it obvious that the controls put in place by the government became more stringent as time passed. The history of politics in South Africa clearly had a direct impact on the detention of political prisoners.

Prison literature in South Africa finds its first substantive literary expression in the writings of Bosman. His work is deeply introspective and personal, and was written for the purpose of cleansing and getting rid of haunting memories. Bosman initially wrote to cleanse himself; thus the primary aim of his writing was personal rather than public. Over time, prison literature becomes more public. Sachs projects his prison experience
as a play; this presupposes that there will be an audience. Brutus and Kathrada write letters, thereby sharing their experiences with others. First, Breytenbach, Cronin, Makhoere and Mashinini write in order to be published so that their experiences could be read by a much wider audience. Thus there is a marked development in the literature from a private to a public focus.

Bosman’s writing can also be considered as an example of social protest whereas the content of the political prison-authors’ writings, in terms of protest, tends to the political. This development must be attributed firstly to the fact that an apolitical prisoner would not be expected to write in a spirit of political protest and, as a result, the focus of his writing would necessarily be more private in nature. This cannot be true for the political prison-authors, whose ‘incriminating’ acts originated from acts of protest. I believe that there are various levels of public protest and this too shows a development that can be tied to the politics of the time. As the apartheid measures became tighter so the resistance increased and in turn the voice of protest became stronger. As a result, the focus of contemporary prison-authors like Mashinini and Makhoere would be the most public of all.

The second development in the writing that can be directly tied to the increasing politicization of the country, and that gave rise to a number of marked differences in the literature, relates to content. Without wishing to state the obvious, it has to be observed that as the laws changed so would the meals, prison conditions, availability of writing materials and access to education, etc. This type of development directly related to the political system would clearly reveal itself in the literature. What is not so obvious in terms of the content of the literature is the developments in narration and prison jargon or diction.

Bosman writes a narrative that lacks evidence of any overtly emotional outbursts, one that is not prototypical of the political prison-authors. In contrast, Breytenbach’s prison experience is seen through the eyes of a very embittered prisoner. As more prison literature is written, more emotional
outpouring is evident. The climax is evidenced in the literature written by the women prisoners, especially Emma Mashinini and Caesarina Makhoere. The powerful, emotive and almost violent narrative found in the later writings of the prison-authors highlights the ever-increasing levels of anger and frustration experienced by political prisoners in South Africa. One must question why emotions would heighten to such an extent. A sole focus on the ‘inside’ does not account for the fact that the emotion of the prisoners later became more intense.

We must therefore turn our attention as to what was happening on the ‘outside’. Riots, strikes, bloodshed and states of emergency were the order of the day for South Africa. Resistance to apartheid was growing, with men, women and children of all races fighting for equal rights. As the resistance strengthened so the reaction to resistance became more violent. One of the most dominant examples of the increasing resistance must be the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. Initially what was planned as a non-violent campaign in which black men would demonstrate against the pass laws at the Sharpeville police station turned into a bloodbath when nervous and inexperienced policemen began shooting at the 10 000-strong crowd. Police misread the anger in the crowds and acted violently. People were shot in the back as they ran away from peacekeeping forces, showing the lack of threat to the men who shot them. Children were hurt and killed. From the Soweto uprising in 1976, violence, devastation and bloodshed increased rapidly. Together with this development came the increase in emotion – people were angrier and more frustrated, and more hearts were broken. More and more, those fighting against the government began to voice their opinions and make demands. This became an emotional barrage of words from those on the ‘outside’ as well as those on the ‘inside’. There can therefore be no doubt that the increasing politicization of the country affected the nature and tone of the utterances of the prison-authors.

Prison jargon is a characteristic common to most South African prison-authors. This facet of prison writing also shows a marked development that
can be tied to the evolution in the politics of the country. Bosman starts with common ‘boob slang’, which for the most part was the adaptation of already existing English and Afrikaans vocabulary (as discussed in detail in Chapter Five). The inclusion of African languages in the writings of prison-authors like Jeremy Cronin, Makhoere and Mashinini signals the sincerity as well as the severity of the political protest taking place in the country. As the controls tightened around the non-white community of South Africa, so those who were fighting against these measures became more aware of the discrimination. By including African languages in their writings, these prison-authors are highlighting the plight of the black people of South Africa in particular and attempting to create a sense of solidarity and inclusion in a time of complete exclusion. Bosman started by writing a prison experience that mildly horrified his readers. Lewin took this further in the writing of a graphic and gruesome account of his imprisonment. As the spirit of resistance increased within the prisons, so did the nature of the diction used by the prison-authors. This is clearly illustrated in the discussions on the individual authors in this study. Examples are cited from Bosman to Mashinini highlighting the common characteristic of ‘prison jargon’ found in this literature, while emphasizing the differences and development in the kind of language used. Thus the diction and jargon of prison literature develops hand-in-hand with the politics of the time.

The diction also changes as a result of the increase in the physical resistance in the prisons. For the most part, Bosman quietly does what he is told. (Although we do read about a food riot in *Cold Stone Jug*, these kinds of reactions were the exception rather than the rule.) This is not true for the political prisoners. As already stated, the reason for their imprisonment is political resistance; therefore it is natural for them to resist the system in prison too. Prison-authors began to show a form of passive resistance in terms of singing when they were told not to or refusing to eat the food. This resistance climaxes with the violent outbreaks seen in the women’s writing, where they physically attack their warders. Makhoere describes one white
wardress called “Mbomvana” (“Red”), who went out of her way to demean and torment not only Makhoere but all of the women prisoners in Kroonstad. “She had this attitude, that she would deal with us brutally” (Makhoere 1989: 60). Makhoere and fellow inmate Maqungo decided they must take action. Maqungo had saved some pointed instruments from math instruction. One morning she and Makhoere attacked Mbomvana, hitting her, slapping her, and stabbing her repeatedly in her face, neck, and body with the sharp instruments (Makhoere 1989: 64). As the blood flowed profusely onto the corridor floor, Makhoere admits, she really wanted to kill Mbomvana: “...we wanted to kill her, there and then. Let us kill her and they can hang us” (Makhoere 1989: 64).

From Bosman to Breytenbach, from Cronin to Mashinini, the reader can see a massive change in the degree of violence found in South African prisons. This change can be seen in all facets of prison life, between prisoners and warders as well as between the prisoners themselves. All of the above-mentioned areas reached a zenith in prison writing and to a large extent we see this peak reached in the women’s prison literature and the writings from Robben Island – the most recent writings to have come out of South African prisons. This climax in violence in the prisons parallels the climax of violence on the ‘outside’ too. Rioting and protest were the order of the day – as seen in the cases of Sharpeville and Langa. Apartheid laws were becoming more repressive and resistance was dealt with harshly. The 1980s were a period of lawlessness and bloodshed. Thus the differences seen in the literature in terms of the violence experienced by the various prison-authors does develop and can be directly tied to the increasing politicization of the country.

The next point of difference is the idea of punishment. Bosman, like Breytenbach, found himself in a ‘hanging’ jail. The death sentence was meted out regularly and the prisoners were constantly aware of the hangings that took place. One would assume that, together with the stringent measures taken by the apartheid government, hangings would increase. This
is not true at all. Even though laws like the Terrorism Act of 1967 allowed for the death sentence to be passed for the crime of political resistance, and violence was on the increase, as was argued above, the development of punishment, directly related to the political situation of the time focused on the reformation of the soul. The development in the way in which the prisoners were punished is therefore directly tied to the problems experienced by the apartheid government in terms of the increasing resistance they were experiencing on the outside. Although physical punishment was used, the government was no longer using it as a means of punishment alone, but rather hoped that it would change the views and attitudes of the political prisoners – that is, reform their souls. There are, of course, always exceptions to the rule and in this regard we must make mention of the numerous detainees who were summarily executed or just disappeared.

The gender of the prison-authors also shows a marked development that can be tied to the increasing politicization of the country. Education and the writing of books has been a male domain in many countries. Few women were educated past primary school level and even fewer published their writing. This too changed together with the transformation in South African politics. Ruth First, arrested in 1963, was one of the earliest female political prisoners to write about her prison experience. There was a marked increase in the number of women fighting against the apartheid government, and taking the lead in a number of resistance movements. As a result of this political development the number of women being imprisoned for their political affiliations increased too. This resulted in a wealth of prison literature written by female prisoners being published in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Thus the strengthening and increase in resistance movements in South Africa as a result of the increase and tightening of discriminatory controls put in place by the government ties in directly with the increase in the number of prison experiences being written by women.
The final difference to be examined is that of the group dynamic in prison. Bosman, an apolitical prisoner, imprisoned for murder, would not necessarily align himself with all the other murderers in prison. In the case of political prisoners, however, a group ethic developed that is not evident in *Cold Stone Jug*. The aim of the apartheid government was to enforce separation and segregation and, as a result of this, political prisoners sought solidarity and unity within the prisons. These prisoners shared a hostile space and as a result of their common beliefs and this common space, a spirit of resistance developed. This development is especially evident in the writings of Lewin, Cronin and Makhoere. This unity strengthened with the increasing number of political activists being imprisoned.

It has been demonstrated that, upon examination of the major differences evident in this comparative analysis of South African prison literature, a marked development in the literature is notable. This development is most definitely a direct result of the increasing politicization of the country. South African prison literature had its first manifestation in *Cold Stone Jug*. However, it came to reflect a growing politicization of South African society and as a result prison literature is a collective expression of protest. I want to close by suggesting that prison literature, as examined in this study, is likely to return to its apolitical origins.

Robben Island, as a prison, must be a symbol of apartheid at its worst, and as a result has become one of the world’s most famous prisons. The prisoners living and writing there wrote of a future South Africa – one in which all men would be equal regardless of colour or creed. With the collapse of the apartheid government, the release of all political prisoners and the resultant changes in the prison system within South Africa, we have come to the end of an era in terms of this particular body of writing.

It is possible that prisoners are still writing, and will continue to write, but this ‘new’ writing will not be continuous with the body of literature under examination in this study because the end of a political era brought with it the end of a period of literature. At the time of writing this thesis, the
women inmates at Pollsmoor Prison have written and published a collection of prison-writings (2004). This particular publication illustrates what has been argued here: prisoners are still writing about their personal prison experiences. These prisoners, however, are not serving time for political crimes (all political prisoners were released during the course of the 1990s) and therefore are, like Herman Charles Bosman, apolitical prisoners writing possibly as means of cleansing, to remain sane or even as a form of protest against the prison system in which they find themselves. But these writings are certainly not political protests against the government in power at the time of their sentencing and imprisonment. The cycle is complete. Bosman, an apolitical prisoner, wrote about his prison experience and that resulted in the formal beginnings of a collection I have called South African Prison Literature. Political utterances by political prisoners and prison literature became synonymous and so prison-authors protested throughout the apartheid era that ended with the release of the prisoners on Robben Island. With the end of apartheid in South Africa began a new era in which new prison literature would be written – prison literature of a post-apartheid South Africa, written by ‘apolitical’ prisoners.

This study began with the examination of the first prison memoir of note, Cold Stone Jug, and ends with the prison experiences of those political prisoners who were released in the early 1990s. Paul Gready suggests that “political prison writing at its best is a genre that attempts to write itself out of existence. The writer hopes that similar accounts will not be needed in the future…” (1993: 523).

Upon reflection, perhaps there is not, after all, that much difference between writing that is a form of ‘social protest’, as in the case of Herman Charles Bosman’s Cold Stone Jug, and that which is explicitly ‘political’. The act of writing about imprisonment is a form of ‘social protest’ and thus all the writings of these authors, both apolitical and political, share the ‘protest’ dimension. “It was said that the Governor was anxious to keep the facts about the convicts’ dissatisfaction over the food out of the newspapers.
The Governor didn’t want the prison to receive unfavourable Press publicity, the convicts said” (Bosman 1999: 143). It just so happens that the *content* of the writing manifests the differences in that what political prisoners write *about* is a form of political protest. Perhaps it is the very notion of incarceration (of robbing human beings of freedom) that is the focal point of ‘protest’ writing. Injustice in society will continue … and so will imprisonment.

Now I have written more or less everything that happens normally in prison. Stories, boob tales, characters and all the rest I shall deal with later. And if I have succeeded in conveying nothing of the misery of prison existence, the soul-killing monotony, the bleak gloom and brutality, then I am very glad. Because these are things that nobody should pen. For one thing you can’t. You only make a fool of yourself if you try.

If at any time I say something in these pages that makes prison seem an unpleasant place to be in, it is only because that happens to be incidental to the narrative, at some stage or other. I would be acting falsely if I gave the impression that prison life is something unalleviated in its despair. I did not find it so.

On the other hand, it would be equally untrue if I tried to pretend that the reality of being in prison falls in any way short of the ideas one has about it before making acquaintance with a gaol in the capacity of a convict. Nobody who has been in prison would ever want to go back again. (Bosman 1999: 88–89)
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