CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

I found myself a displaced person, caught between and rejected by the two worlds with which I presumed a mental level; it was perhaps this single factor which has contributed to the strong feeling of rejection which is apparent in my reactions, but more constructively it forced upon me the realisation and the acceptance of my condition; I became cynical about my colour and the reaction to it.

I directed my energy to my writing, determined to use it as the weapon for gate-crashing into the worlds which rejected me; my writing showed a studied omission of commitment, the histrionics of tight-fisted protest, and in my first published short story, *The Dignity of Begging*, I created a satirical situation in which I sat back and laughed at the worlds which rejected. [sic] I projected myself into the character of Nathaniel Mokgomare, an educated African capable in any society of earning himself an independent living, but handicapped by being black in a society which has determined that black is the condition of being dependent on white charity, in the same sense that a cripple is dependent for his existence on public charity; but the beggar needs to be horribly deformed to arouse sympathetic patronage, and the African is disqualified by his colour from earning an independent living, hopelessly helpless in his incapacity to overcome the burden of his colour. (Modisane 1986: 88)

Had Can Themba not died an untimely death at the age of forty-three, he might have written much the same in an autobiography. The *Drum* writers, Nadine Gordimer believes, “were essentially products of Johannesburg urbanism” (Nicol 1991: 156). They wrote about what was familiar to them, expressing their lives in their fiction, creating characters which represented them. And although theirs was a period in
South African history which had been silenced by the government of the time, the township life of the 1950s was very much a reality. These writers, who were highly literate people with an excellent understanding of and a love for the English language, were pioneer storytellers and journalists. Not only did they initiate the modern urban short story by blacks in South Africa, but they also started an era of investigative journalism among blacks in a society in which political tolerance was extremely low. Among them Can Themba was highly visible as he was equally adept at fiction and non-fiction. In fact, his journalistic writings anticipated the so-called ‘New Journalism’, which became a dominant genre in the United States in the 1960s. Themba managed to create a unique kind of nonfiction which was a first in South African literature.

Unfortunately original biological material about Can Themba seems impossible to unearth. Even when he was alive his contemporaries knew little about his personal circumstances. An interview with Jurgen Schadeberg reveals nothing new about him, but it does stress Themba’s unique, eccentric approach and style – to life as well as to writing.

Daniel Canadoise D’Orsay Themba was born on 21 June 1924 in Marabastad near Pretoria into a family of four. The bright young boy won a scholarship to Fort Hare University College, where he graduated in 1947 with a first class-degree in English. He later returned to earn a university education diploma, becoming a teacher in Western Native Township on the outskirts of Johannesburg. When he won Drum’s first short story competition in 1953, he was offered a position as staff writer. Themba had five stories published in Drum, but was also responsible for various pieces of investigative journalism. In 1959 he was dismissed, mainly because of unreliability linked to alcohol abuse. In 1960 he started working for Drum’s sister publication, Golden City Post. He went into voluntary exile in Swaziland in 1963, and was declared a ‘statutory communist’ in 1966 under South Africa’s 1965 Suppression of Communism Amendment Act, which meant that his writing was banned in South Africa. He taught in Swaziland until his alcohol-related death in September 1967.

Can Themba, like the rest of the Drum writers, does not fit neatly into a particular ‘protest’ profile. The 1950s was a time dominated by apartheid, as the Nationalist government had just come into power in 1948, and its immediate aim was to establish
separate spheres in the population of South Africa by dividing it into defined racial categories. Severe measures were introduced to ensure the preservation of the racial identity of the white population, which discriminated against ‘non-Europeans’, denying them their basic human rights. Intellectuals like Can Themba felt this keenly. However, Themba, as one of a group of black writers employed by Drum, an illustrated magazine aimed at urban black readers (although it was owned and edited by whites), was granted a voice in a society which was restricted by racist laws. Drum was also a vehicle for imaginative writing by black writers in English (the modern urban short story, investigative journalism and the so-called new non-fiction, forerunner of the ‘New Journalism’). The magazine allowed Themba a measure of political freedom, before he was silenced permanently by the apartheid state when he went into exile.

The world of Can Themba was Sophiatown, with its fluid social structure – slum and community co-existed in this pressure-cooker of contradictions – where it was almost possible to believe that the Nationalists did not own you body and soul. Township life in the 1950s was culturally rich, but it was also extremely dangerous and desperately poor in financial terms. Can Themba, who wrote about this decade of idealism and hope, disillusionment and crime, with passionate enthusiasm – “the supreme intellectual tsotsi … raising hell in the neighbourhood” (Nkosi 1985: x) – was a cult figure in his time.

Today, more than fifty years later, in a post-struggle South Africa, under the democratic rule of the ANC, there seems to be a nostalgic return to this decade of idealism and hope. For example, in an upmarket, popular shopping centre, The Zone, in Rosebank, Johannesburg, a trendy boutique, Stoned Cherrie, sells ‘afro-urban’ wear, like T-shirts with pictures of Drum magazine cover girls of the 1950s. There are also various so-called coffee-table books about the 1950s, mostly featuring striking photographs, e.g. freelance photographer Jurgen Schadeberg’s The Black and White Fifties (2001). Another example is the popular Gold Reef City Casino in Johannesburg hosting the Back o’ the Moon club, named after a popular Sophiatown shebeen, frequented by Can Themba. And Themba’s well-known short story, The Suit, was recently reworked into a play and a dance drama. These attempts to recapture the feel and ‘magic’ of an era concentrate on the romantic aspects of the shebeen sub-culture of the 1950s. However, a close examination of the life and work
of Can Themba reveals that the 1950s were, in fact, an era of economic exploitation, cruel laws and racial tension. For although Themba had a penchant for the dramatic, even the spectacular, using a racy style, suspense-filled plots and unexpected endings, often turning to tsotsi camaraderie, even becoming a cult figure, he ultimately represents the urban black culture of a society subjected to political and social apartheid. Themba’s influence is still felt today, as, in a post-struggle, democratic South Africa, many blacks are still living in townships and in a certain sense still suffer this kind of marginalisation.

Many of Can Themba’s contemporaries admired him as a genius with supreme wit and a love of irony, but most of them also believed that he had squandered his talents, drowning them in alcohol, never producing anything of real worth. Themba was regarded by some as more of a teacher than a journalist, as “a poet and not a politico” (Nicol 1991: 181). This may be because he disguised his pain behind a devil-may-care attitude and a reliance on alcohol. It may also be because he himself claimed that he was not politically inclined. It may even be because his behaviour was often flippant, reckless and even irresponsible. Lewis Nkosi, in his obituary, claims to mourn “what might have been” (Nkosi 1985: xi). Themba, he believes, could have contributed greatly to South Africa’s literature had he not “misused or neglected his talent” (xi).

Although Themba, admittedly, never ventured beyond investigative journalism and popular fiction, his importance as a voice of an oppressed people should not be underestimated. Themba, it seems, created popular romantic heroes, heroines, urban myths, all of which have been labelled melodramatic, even “vulgar escapist stuff” (Mphahlele 1971: 188). However, because Themba is so true to his milieu, it is difficult to distinguish between romance and realism, making a judgement of literary worth seem debatable. And, above all, Can Themba was a role model, known by almost everyone in Sophiatown. Even today, decades after his death, when his name is mentioned, people identify with him as the down-to-earth guy, who proved that it was possible for downtrodden, disregarded blacks to aspire to, and to a certain extent achieve, the heights of Western culture.
When evaluating popular fiction and political journalism, the danger exists that works in these genres, because they are widely accessible, may be regarded as less complex and less ‘aesthetically valuable’ than high-brow ‘literary’ works. However, although popular works target specific audiences, in readily accessible ways, this does not necessarily mean that these works are inevitably less skilled or less powerful than examples of ‘high art’. Popular texts speak the popular discourse – in Can Themba’s case, that of the oppressed black people of the 1950s. This made his short stories and journalistic pieces politically effective, as they addressed contemporary social issues, and mobilized social consciousness to challenge (if not change) the existing order. Themba understood ‘the struggle’, as he himself was part of it. Although the Drum readership was, admittedly, thoroughly initiated into Western escapist entertainment, it did also search for a black urban voice which spoke of aspirations to a better life. Drum was primarily a popular magazine which claimed that its aim was to entertain its readers rather than to address political issues. However, the popular exposé article, which was an impartial examination of, usually, unacceptable working or living conditions, did reflect specific desires on the part of the writers to produce social change. As I shall go on to argue, Themba’s short stories, which on the surface may seem sensational, politically naïve, even stereotypical, do represent the voice of the urban black of the 1950s.

The immediate question which arises is whether Themba’s storytelling transcended its social context, whether he still speaks to a twenty-first century reader. In this regard I shall argue that Themba’s stories do not only have sociological, but also literary value. Themba was indeed forced by a popular magazine to indulge the needs of its readers, who demanded escapism. However, he was also a myth, a writer-journalist who used the unreal reality of Sophiatown not only as the “yardstick of what the South-African non-white should read” (Mphahlele 1971: 188), but also as “a metaphor of the self” (Gready 1990: 162), a symbol of the voice of any, and all, oppressed writers, at any time, anywhere. According to Es’kia Mphahlele the Drum writers of the 1950s

used an English style that was well understood by the township reader. The imaginative writing courted no political confrontation: it spoke of the drama of black life, its triumphs and defeats, survival, culture and sub-culture,
the police terror and legislative restrictions it was subjected to. The writers helped fashion a township culture and gave it literary expression …. To the extent that black politics was dramatized and indeed displayed a theatrical style, the masses developed an awareness. They had found a political language suited to their own time. Similarly, the writer had found his tongue – a language – and relative freedom of expression that matched the political expression of the decade. (Mphahlele 2002:308-309)

Can Themba was undeniably part of the socializing process of the 1950s. His short stories and his journalistic pieces, reflecting the shebeen culture and Sophiatown magic of the era, had a definite everyday, accessible, ‘human’ slant. But does this necessarily mean that his work merely provided a social barometer of the decade? The world of 1950s South Africa – in his case from an oppressed black point of view – can obviously not be directly applied to the twenty-first century. However, Themba’s work, although it may not necessarily always have addressed political issues head on, did reflect a desire to produce social change and, above all, create a just, colour-blind society. Such ideals are timeless and universal. In this respect he does transcend his immediate social background.

It has been argued that the short story was the dominant genre in the 1950s because of the sense of urgency radiated by this turbulent decade, and that the writers recorded the violence, the excitement, the anger of their society on an almost minute-to-minute basis. There was usually a time limit involved: no leisurely pace was afforded these fiction writers, who doubled as journalists. However, Richard Rive, interviewed in April 1963 by Lewis Nkosi, disagrees:

It’s one of those dangerous generalisations, I think, that have been very current in Africa that a certain mode of writing is the prerogative of a particular part of Africa … they felt that the short story mode was initially the best mode to get started and the discipline called for would stand them in very good stead when it came to novel writing. (Duerden 1972: 158)
However, in reality, as far as the Drum writers are concerned, anyway, very few of them ‘got started’. In exile Modisane, Matshikiza, Nkosi and Mphahlele produced autobiographies. Mphahlele, a diligent, if somewhat austere scholar, produced several critical works and novels. Nkosi produced some critical works and two novels, the second, *Underground People*, as recently as 2002. Themba produced nothing. It does seem feasible to claim that the short story mode was initially the best one to get started, and that the discipline called for would aid successful novel writing. However, the danger did exist that South African black writers merely used this kind of prose as it was “the most handy and accessible mode[s] of expression to deal with one’s own anger and sense of urgency” (Mphahlele 2002: 309). The fact remains though that in 1950s South Africa, in an uncertain society, with no outlet but the popular press, in this case Drum, to publish one’s work, there was very little, if any, encouragement to start a novel. On the other hand, if a writer wants to write, nothing will stop him. J.R.A. Bailey also seemed to be in two minds about the real reason why Can Themba never produced anything more substantial than short stories and journalistic pieces:

To silence a gifted writer, to cut him off from his public, is almost to kill him. And this chap had a measure of genius. (Bailey 1967: 3)

What did his writing add up to? A few short stories of real quality and many excellent feature articles. He lacked the persistence and constancy of purpose for a novel. Like the historian John Aubrey, he could not manage more than a few pages at a time and, like his famous predecessor, these pages carry the quintessential Can for not being strained beyond his powers. (22)

There can be no one ultimate explanation for what seemed to be Themba’s lack of commitment, his inability to produce anything other than work related to his own experience. Alex la Guma, interviewed by Robert Serumaga in October 1966, believed that a writer aware of restrictions will not fall into the trap of self-absorbed writing:

The danger in South Africa is that writers can become confined, compartmentalized, and that many writers have taken the easy way
out, of writing only what they know and not attempting to go beyond that. But even if one has to write within a milieu, a particular environment, or portray a particular environment, I believe that universal ideas can still be expressed within that milieu, within that environment so that your writing does not become confined. Although your stage may be set in a particular environment, your ideas and writing are not confined. (Duerden 1972: 93)

Black writers transcending their racialized environment illustrate the universality of this marginalized situation. Toni Morrison agrees, claiming that these writers “enter into corners of the consciousness held off and away from the reach of the writer’s imagination” (Rivkin 1998: 923). She believes that writers’ ability to imagine what is not the self, their ability to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power as writers. She further maintains that the “languages they use and the social and historical context in which these languages signify are indirect and direct revelations of that power and its limitations” (923). Mphahele also agrees, maintaining that the writer who is capable of literary journalism manages to transcend reality. He stresses that this is not an escape from reality, as the writer always works with real-life materials. However, although the writer is a product of his or her own history, Mphahele argues, his or her art “refines history” (Mphahele 2002: 442-3).

Although the socio-political circumstances of the 1950s cannot be transferred to a post-apartheid South Africa, Themba, it seems, managed to relate the fundamental universal humanity of political protest to his readers, ultimately emphasizing the desire for change. But one cannot ignore that most of Themba’s contemporaries, who knew him personally, believed that the reason why he did not move beyond the genre of the short story, the journalistic piece, the anecdote, is not because he did not have the ability, but because he lacked the endurance. Over and over they mention his alcohol abuse. He had started out promisingly enough when he won Drum’s first short story competition. At the time, he claimed not to be drinking. If this was true, he must have started fairly soon afterwards. Jurgen Schadeberg claims that he “noticed a certain deterioration of what originally was a very reliable and sober intellectual” (Schadeberg 2002: 109). Obed Musi claimed that “[h]e was a master of the English language. But not a master of his own life” (Nicol 1991: 179).
Nadine Gordimer agrees that Themba did not become “a great writer” (Nicol 1991: 177) because he did not “have the self-discipline to write” (177), not because of his circumstances.

Can Themba may be accused of squandering his talents, but his command of the English language is striking. He loved it, reputedly claiming that he could not even speak a black language (Nicol 1991: 179). The question of choice of language has been central to postcolonial studies, especially whether the dominant language of a ‘colonised’ country, in this case English, can be used by African writers to convey their ideological and political positions. Given the multilingual nature of most African countries, South Africa included, Chinua Achebe’s statement that “a language spoken by Africans on African soil, a language in which Africans write, justifies itself” (Smith 1976: 2) seems logical, especially in the case of Can Themba, who, like his Drum colleagues, was highly literate. Mphahlele maintains that learning English was initially compulsory, but later became essential to job opportunities. He claims that it gave him and his contemporaries “a sense of power to be able to master the external world which came to us in English” (Mphahlele 2002: 447). He believes that, because of extended education through private study, a love of English is conditioned and generated, seeing that it did provide them with this sense of power. According to Mphahlele, even in African countries where there was far less political harassment, like Nigeria, the indigenous literature has inevitably been influenced by English fiction. English literary forms, he maintains, are used “to create a kind of fusion with African history, mythology, setting, theatre and the symbolism these elements made available” (447). Niyi Osundare, one of Nigeria’s internationally recognised poets, disagrees. He laments the ease and complacency with which Western theories take over the global literary and intellectual arena, the way they inscribe themselves as though the other parts of the world were a tabula rasa. There is something ethnocentric about this ‘universalism’, an attitude and behaviour which constitute the world’s literary discourse into a monumental Western monologue. In several ways, this totalises literary experience and the way people relate to it. So rigidly located in one place, how can we see the great mask of the world from different angles? (Anyidodo 1999: 63)
Can Themba reputedly carried with him the Complete Works of Oscar Wilde (Chapman 1989: 23). Was he publicly demonstrating his legendary Wildean irony and wit? Was he deliberately cultivating the image of the ‘new African’, influenced by the dandyism of Oscar Wilde? Or was he mocking the inhumane laws that denied him a “whiteman’s world where everything significant is forbidden” (Themba 1985: 8) – all the time covering up his hurt at being one of “those sensitive might-have-beens who had knocked on the door of white civilization (at the highest levels that South Africa could offer) and had heard a gruff ‘No’ or a ‘Yes’ so shaky and insincere that we withdrew our snail horns at once” (Themba 1961: 50)?

Autobiography in writing is often chosen by African intellectuals as a “catharsis for the sufferings of second-class citizens with first-class brains” (Gordimer 1973: 7). In Themba’s case this certainly seems true, as his later storytelling became increasingly autobiographical, surpassing the usual dependence of a writer on material from his own life. Themba, like his contemporaries, was inevitably absorbed in his own search for identity in an oppressive society, trying to make sense of his situation. Jane Watts agrees that most African writers “have used themselves as mirrors, and their picture of society has depended on their reflections of themselves” (Watts 1989: 108). This particular form of writing seems in numerous ways adapted to the needs of South African writers. However, Watts believes that “objective reality has been broken down” (111) because of the social fragmentation of the South African situation. She asks whether marginalized black writers are able to “elevate themselves to a detached state of mind in which they can unemotionally overlook the limitations on their … freedom … can purge their work of that compulsive anger, hatred and didacticism evoked by what is happening around them all the time …” (112).

I shall argue that Themba, by using humour in both his autobiographical writing as well as in his day-to-day human relations, creates a kind of defense mechanism that enables him to both emphasize the absurdity of his society, as well as detach himself from it. However, because of the fictional nature of literary texts, even if these are avowedly autobiographical, an interpretation of his work remains merely an attempt by the reader to recover the experience expressed by the writer. When asked by Sneja Gunew, “if you are constructed in one particular language, what kinds of violence does it do to your subjectivity if one then has to move into another language, and suppress whatever selves or subjectives were constructed by the first
…” (During 1995: 201), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak maintained that “[i]f one looks at the history of post-Enlightenment theory, the major problem has been the problem of autobiography: how subjective structures can, in fact, give objective truth” (201-2). She believes that textual criticism cannot be based on disinterested readings by a presumed community. Mphahlele agrees:

I can only remind writers (including myself) that we have an unwritten contract with our readers. Even in the work of art that is accessible, there can be difficulty deep beneath the transparent membrane, which is the prose meaning (surface meaning if you like). Sometimes it makes for a culture gap between the work and the observer. We cannot ignore these barriers. But once in, the reader is on the ground floor. He has to listen to the sounds from the upper floors, the attic, from under the ground, from the yard, the toilet, the kitchen, and so on. These are cultural resonances that, if one patiently goes about decoding them with the help of documentary material, can become available.

(Mphahlele 2002: 386)

In Themba’s case, the “decoding” seems fairly straightforward, despite the “culture gap”, as most of the characters depicted in his short stories are not too far removed from his own experience. Themba’s anger at “the white man’s intonation” (Themba 1961: 51), which he experiences as “barbed wire across a bare back” (51), is never expressed in a blatant way. Instead he affirms the difficulty with which urban blacks coped with the restrictions imposed on them with irony and wit, illuminating the paradoxical nature of being a black intellectual in ‘white South Africa’. A 2003 reader of “Requiem for Sophiatown”, is, inevitably, filled with a sense of ‘what might have been’ had Themba been born later, been able to experience a fair and just society.

Terry Eagleton maintains that cultural studies have proved that there is “no neutral or innocent reading of a work of art” (Eagleton 1996: 208). He claims that “we are always … installed firmly on the inside of the culture we hope to criticize, so thoroughly constituted by its interests and beliefs that to put them into radical question would involve leaping out of our own skins” (203). He rejects the assumption that when encountering a text, a reader can put aside his own particular history and judge it from the vantage point of some classless, genderless, non-ethnic, disinterested universal subject.
In “The Search for Grounds in Literary Study”, J. Hillis Miller claims that “a good reader … especially notices oddnesses, gaps, anacoluthons, non sequiturs, apparently irrelevant details, in short, all the marks of the inexplicable, all the marks of the unaccountable, perhaps of the mad, in the text. On the other hand, the reader’s task is to reduce the inexplicable, to find its reason, its law, its ground, to make the mad sane. The task of the reader, it will be seen, is not too difficult from the task of the psychoanalyst” (Davis 1998: 34).

According to Brenda Cooper, “the critic should distinguish between those writers who uncritically portray and share in ideological contradiction, however exclusively typical of a particular social class that portrayal might be, and those writers who have an understanding of social struggle and inscribe it in their texts” (Cooper 1992: 9).

But what about Can Themba? Did he write because of his personal anguish, or was he first and foremost a political and a social witness? I shall demonstrate that, given his particular social, political and literary milieu, Can Themba, though arguably not having developed his full potential, did in his literary pursuit illustrate not only an active imagination interpreting the socio-political system of the 1950s with its restrictions and marginalization, but also his own personal search for purpose, for identity. This search seems as real in our own time as it was then. His fiction – ‘ordinary’ stories about blacks in the 1950s – is often misinterpreted as melodramatic and apolitical, whereas, in fact, it singles him out among his contemporaries as an intellectual with a flair for the dramatic, and a political slant often not recognised at a first glance. I shall further demonstrate, through critical analysis of his work, that it is Can Themba’s incisive intellect, encased in a style full of flair and wit, that distinguishes him an enduring figure in the South African literary landscape – in short, a figure worthy of his mythological status.
CHAPTER TWO:

SOPHIATOWN: “AS DREAMS ARE MADE ON” ¹

Nobody can write the real story of Sophiatown, the rise and fall of the township, the magic and wonderment of the place …

(Mattera 1987: 49)

The concept of a so-called rainbow nation as a unity of different races and cultures was officially born after the first free general elections in South Africa in the 1990s. But it was conceived many decades earlier in a place which combined magic and smut, respectability and crime, black and white: Sophiatown. Kofifi, as it was also known, was a freehold township. According to Jurgen Schadeberg:

There was poverty in Sophiatown. There were areas that were somewhat slummy. There were gangs. There was crime and there were cutthroats, but it was a real suburb. It had all the facilities a normal suburb has. Whereas when people moved to Orlando or Meadowlands, or wherever, there was nothing there. Sophiatown was romanticized afterwards. Sophiatown was a symbol because it was a place where people were more mixed than in other places. And people owned their own property.

(Schadeberg 2002: 111-112)

For all its supposed diversity, Sophiatown was predominantly black. In fact, it was a so-called ‘black spot’ among white Johannesburg suburbs like Westdene and Newlands. It was also predominantly poor: “[a] hideous face belonged to squalor or poverty or sickness or death … the greater part of Sophiatown was a deplorable,
sickening slum. Blacks had freehold rights and some houses were comparable to those of whites living in the adjoining suburbs, but Sophiatown was rotting at the core” (Mattera 1987: 73). However, “the little Chicago of Johannesburg” (50), was essentially known for its cosmopolitan flavour. All races and classes mixed, relatively free from control by an extremist Afrikaner government, in an over-populated, urban pressure-cooker. Sophiatown “was inhabited by an estimated 200 000 people of different ethnic backgrounds who lived tightly-knit, mixing cultures, traditions and superstitions in a manner perhaps unique in Southern Africa. Every conceivable space was occupied by a living thing – man or animal” (49).

Above all, the ghetto-like township was unpredictable and dangerous:

There were times of searching for a loved one in some alley; finding him or her wounded in a hospital or jail, or dead in a morgue. Or checking for husband or father, a brother or a son who had never returned home from work. Or waiting for a mother, an aunt or sister who did not get off the bus or tram where you usually waited for them. Then the anguish and anxiety that would follow reports of a woman raped, beaten and robbed by the jobless and won’t-work brigades of tsotsis who owned the days and ruled the nights. (Mattera 1987: 50)

Crime by African against African was an everyday reality in Sophiatown. Drum seemed obsessed with gangsterism and tsotsis. The magazine ran articles almost every month, reporting on crime figures, the circumstances forcing ordinary citizens into a life of crime, and the shebeen subculture, which fed these offences. For example, an article in the November 1951 issue of Drum, “The Birth of a Tsotsi”, describes the classic circumstances under which “a young boy takes the wrong turning”: “With the grinding poverty and the sea of squalor that surrounds the ‘Gold City’, it is not difficult to understand the rest. There is a struggle for existence, and the individual intends to survive”.  

Young, usually homeless, boys, in order to survive without an education or a job, started pickpocketing and handbag-snatching, went on to payroll-snatching and housebreaking, after which many of them joined gangs and became involved in serious, violent crimes, even becoming famous. According to Don Mattera:
No story about gangsterism or violence in the townships of Johannesburg can be complete without that of ‘Kort Boy’ – real name George Mbalweni – the five-foot-nothing knifeman from Benoni, a former mining town on the East Rand, near Johannesburg… Kort Boy was a legend in his day – much hated, much loved – it all depended on which end of the knife you were at. (Mattera 1987: 102)

Derrick Thema wrote the story of this legend, Kortboy: a Sophiatown Legend, “a gangster with a heart” (Thema 1999: 23). He relates the influence of American film on the behaviour of Sophiatown thugs: “Kortboy, like all youngsters growing up in Sophiatown, was influenced by American movies, which he and his friend watched at the Odin cinema in Good Street …. Gangster films were the most popular of the time” (18). Mattera, in his foreword to Thema’s fictionalised autobiography, agrees that “American movies, books, music, magazines, film-star names, dress codes, habits, American jargon and film acting, all impacted heavily on the psyches of the inhabitants of Sophiatown. America especially affected the streetwise ghetto warlords and city-slickers” (Mattera 1999: 5).

The romantic view of gangsters as victims of an unfair society, seeking identity in trying to deal with the realities of oppression, was largely an image created by writers (and by the gangsters themselves), as, in reality, their society turned a blind eye to crime, mostly to protect itself:

I learned there in Sophiatown, that one looked at the killing and never at the faces of the killers; one also knew that the law is white and justice casual, that it could not protect us against the knives of Sophiatown, so we tolerated the murders whilst the law encouraged them with its indifference.

(Modisane 1986: 63)

Themba, popularly known as an ‘intellectual tsotsi’, compared the violence of the Sophiatown gangs to that of the self-destructive artist. He believed in his own mythical status, imposing it on the romantic myth of the gangster. In fact, most of the Drum writers identified with the creative, resisting tsotsi rather than the ‘boring’ black professional. They saw themselves as outlaws rather than conformers. This allowed them to sustain the notion of an unreal world of fantasy that was Sophiatown. Gangs also provided a sense of identity, of belonging – they were part of the unique
character of the township. Themba, it seems, also knew some of the Sophiatown gangsters personally. Mike Nicol recalls Kortboy telling him in an interview how Can Themba wrote love letters for him and his other gang members, known as the Americans (Nicol 1991: 73). In the same interview, Kortboy’s affinity with the people of Sophiatown also becomes clear:

‘We used to protect people in Sophiatown. We didn’t like people must be robbed at night.’
Did they pay you protection money?
‘Naw.’
So you didn’t rob people in Sophiatown?
‘No.’ (Nicol 1991: 73)

The question arises if Sophiatown was a slum and its most influential inhabitants were criminals, why it was considered a magical place in the 1950s. A great deal of its appeal apparently lay in the fact that Sophiatown was able to create its own society, as it was open to all and any interpretations. Anthony Sampson, for example, recalls preferring to spend his evenings in Sophiatown rather than in the white suburbs because:

… it was such a fascinating place with a mixture of personalities in the shebeens, from well-educated people like Can Themba to the gangsters, businessmen or politicians just dropping in for a drink. It was wildly romantic and tremendously entertaining compared with the formality of the white world. Sophiatown was a meeting place for so many. (Nicol 1991: 230)

Nadine Gordimer, although she believes that Sophiatown was a romanticised slum, nevertheless remembers its “sense of community”, which she recalls as simultaneously being “a sense of survival and fun” (Nicol 1991: 231).

The unique quality of Sophiatown was further enhanced by its shebeen subculture. Anthony Sampson remembers being introduced to the township and its ‘illegal’ drinking spots by Can Themba:

… the first one he took me to was called Back o’ the Moon and run by a woman called Fatsy. We found our way through the back yards and alleyways of a part of Sophiatown known as ‘Berlin’. Can knocked on the door and called the woman’s
name. She shot back the bolts, and this huge, fleshy woman literally hauled us into the room. (Nicol 1991: 95)

Although blacks in the 1950s were not allowed to drink, this prohibition did not stop them. The Sophiatown shebeens sold illegal booze, both store-bought ‘European’ liquor, as well as home-brewed skokiaan:

‘White man’s booze’, ‘European liquor’, may have been forbidden but was available everywhere in shebeens and township back yards. As were some dangerous and potent home-made brews which always ruined, and often ended, their drinkers’ lives. There was also ‘kaffir beer’, ‘Bantu beer’, ‘municipal beer’, ‘pink gold’ – call it what you will – being consumed in vast quantities in the township beer halls. (Nicol 1991: 96)

But the shebeens were not merely informal drinking clubs. They were homely places where everyone knew each other. Apartheid ceased to exist:

The shebeens, however, were another story. Here was what Nat Nakasa called that ‘noble institution’, those ‘hospitable homes’. Here was a place outside of apartheid as the names reflected: Back o’ the Moon, Cabin in the Sky, Little Heaven, The Sanctuary, Kind Lady. (97)

Modisane recalls how his mother, after the death of his father, was forced to become a shebeen queen in order to keep body and soul together. Her customers, he remembers, drank for one reason only – to get drunk, as, for them, “getting drunk was a purposeful destruction of the pain of their lives, a drowning of themselves in this orgiastic expenditure. They were breaking out, escaping from themselves” (Modisane 1986: 39).

All the ‘main’ Drum boys, Henry Nxumalo, Can Themba, Todd Matshikiza, Bloke Modisane, and Casy Motsisi, lived hard and drank hard. Their maxim, taken from Willard Motley’s Knock on My Door, was “Live fast, die young, and have a good-looking corpse”, hence the title of Mike Nicol’s book on the Drum decade:

Casey Motsisi used to boast: ‘I don’t go out for my columns,
my columns come to me.’ And in large part they did, mostly because he was sitting in a shebeen at the time. He was known as the ‘Shakespeare of the shebeens’, and could be heard leaving the office proclaiming, ‘No nooze is good nooze. But no booze is sad nooze indeed’, as he went out to take up his bardship. (Nicol 1991: 225)

Es’kia Mphahlele, it seems, was the one ‘Drum guy’ not seduced by the aura of hard drinking. By his own admission he was unsuited to journalism: “I felt too deeply to be objective in my reporting … I did not really want to be a journalist. I wanted to teach and I wanted to be a writer” (Mphahlele, 1971: 194). Mphahele recalls the “kamikaze attitude” (Nicol, 1991: 97) towards alcohol. Like most ofThemba’s contemporaries mentioned before, he also believes that drink gave Themba the illusion of coping, while in fact he was destroying himself. Themba, it seems, while mythologizing his life as Sophiatown legend and shebeen intellectual, used his hard drinking as part of this image he created. Lewis Nkosi in his obituary describes Themba’s drinking as “phenomenal” (Nkosi 1985: ix). Jurgen Schadeberg recalls his drinking bouts that sometimes lasted up to two weeks, during which time he was absent from the Drum office:

We had a drinking culture. Ezekiel Mphahlele was an outsider. He was not part of the gang. When we moved from 176 Main Street to Troye Street, I found out something [I had not known]. There was a shebeen on the roof. Everybody was always sitting around sipping through straws out of coke bottles and it took me a long time to discover that the cold drinks were spiked with brandy. There was also the attitude of the management. Be a man and have a drink. The majority drank. It was also the thing of defiance. I think Can Themba would not have drunk if it were not for this culture. (Schadeberg 2002: 109-110)

Themba himself, in a self-aware moment, confessed to trying to dull his despair with alcohol. He remembers burying his life “under a load of Sophiatown bottles” (Themba 1961: 49):

By this time it was becoming clear to me that I was really fighting something inside that nibbled at my soaked soul. Yet, what the hell! We were cavaliers of the evanescent, romantics who turned the revolt inwards, upon our own
bruised spirits. It was flight, now, no more just self-erasure.
(Themba 1961: 51)

But the agony never left him. Jurgen Schadeberg recalls that “[b]efore he left 
*Drum* he was living in a drunken stupor. Still being very bright and brilliant.
Philosophising” (Schadeberg 2002: 109). Themba himself admits to the many 
different bottles of liquor standing on the table, and the youngsters gathered around to 
listen to him, following his example of drinking themselves into a stupor:

> It was conscience that struck me, I say, because I knew that 
> many of them looked up to me, my way of life, and repeated 
> my despair and its defences behind my back. I knew that they 
> were excited by me when I said: “Why should one believe in 
> anything, when one could live – live gentlemen, at 212 degrees 
> Fahrenheit?”

(Themba 1961: 49-50)

Most of the *Drum* writers, including Can Themba, had lived in Sophiatown at 
various stages during the 1950s. Themba called his room at 111 Ray Street the ‘House 
of Truth’ (Themba 1961: 49). Here, he claimed, people were only allowed to speak 
the truth. The philosophising that carried on was accompanied by heavy drinking. 
Stan Motjuwadi recalls that “the place perhaps was Can’s way of cocking a snook at 
nobility, officialdom and anything that smacked of the formal” (Patel 1990: 6)

Although the importance of Sophiatown varied in the lives of these writers, it should 
ever be under-estimated. To most of them, the brash suburb with its ‘shadow life’ 
provided an ambiguous reality, which did indeed allow them to cope with the hard 
reality of their daily lives. These black, “sensitive might-have-beens” (Themba 1961: 
50) were extremely bright. They had been educated at missionary schools and most of 
them graduated from Fort Hare University, Can Themba with a first class in English 
literature. Yet they were excluded from white intellectual circles:

> I made an honest effort at being intellectual about my oppression, 
> shut its reality from out of my mind …

> I persuaded myself into becoming a leisurely committed theorist 
> sliming about in search of respectability; it was easy during the 
> United Party Government of General J.C. Smuts; semi-educated 
> and responsible Africans were encouraged to feel less black than
Their uneducated brothers; they were issued with Exemption Certificates, a Pass which exempted them from carrying a Pass, but most important, they were formed into an exclusive and effective middle class, not white enough to be European and too respectable to be black. The Exemption Certificate became a symbol of snobocracy.

... but I was a nobody’s son, brought up in a shebeen...

I was rejected by this world, the white world rejected me...

(Modisane 1986: 87)

Sophiatown became a refuge, as it was possible to live, or create the impression of living, in a classless society. Although the township was occupied predominantly by working-class Africans, it lacked a ‘geography of class’, as the poor lived next to the wealthy. This fluidity of its social structure created an illusion of living in different layers of society at the same time. The diversity was reflected in the literary knowledge of the wider community – even the tsotsis were familiar with Shakespeare (Themba 1985: 59).

The black writers of the 1950s used the English language and literature not only to capture the essence of township life, but also to create a new urbanised world, dislocated from traditional rural life. Their intense, self-confessed ‘living for the moment’ meant these writers were trapped by their own present tradition. Known as the Sophiatown set, they seemingly wrote in a vacuum, ignoring the oral tradition of rural custom, refusing to adapt it into an urban context. To them the idea of tribalism suggested cultural apartheid, undermining their own, self-made image of the city as a kind of brave new world. Rural practices were almost frivolously dismissed: “I threw my hands up in despair and thought that one of these days I really must slaughter a spotlessly white goat as a sacrifice to the spirits of my forefathers. I have been neglecting my superstitions too dangerously long” (Themba 1985: 8).

However, Verwoerd’s government set out to destroy this missionary education. The Nationalists passed a bill declaring that the mission schools had failed because their curriculum and teaching methods ‘ignored segregation’ and did not prepare ‘natives’ for the positions they would realistically occupy in the society. Not only was the so-called Bantu Education Act the final insult, it also deprived black South Africans of quality education, forcing a slave mentality on their children. There was widespread protest, with the African National Congress attempting to organize
boycotts, but the Afrikaners won, for the time being, and the writers went into exile, there to document their plight. None of their writing was allowed publication in South Africa until the middle to late 1980s.

For Can Themba the township resembled the strength of the African, his will to survive, his ability to laugh at himself, his adaptability. With nostalgia he recalls the magic of Sophiatown:

Dwarf, who used to find a joke in everything. He used to walk into Bloke’s place, catch us red-handed playing the music of Mozart. He used to cock his ear, listen a little, and in his gravel voice comment: ‘No wonder he’s got a name like that’. There is nothing that Dwarf loved more than sticking out his tongue to a cop and running for it. I once caught him late at night in his Meadowlands house washing dishes. He still manfully tries to laugh at himself.

And Mabeni’s, where the great Dolly Rathebe once sang the blues to me. I didn’t ask her. She just sidled over to me on the couch and broke into song. It was delicious. But now Dolly is in Port Elizabeth, and Mabeni, God knows where. (Themba 1959: 50)

Themba believed that “for his sense of contrast and his sharp awareness of the pungent flavours of life, only Charles Dickens – or perhaps, Victor Hugo – could have understood Sophiatown” (Themba 1985: 6). He is undoubtedly a master in capturing the essence of “the Sophiatown of my time, before the government destroyed it”:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us; we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way … (Themba 1985: 5-6)

The contrast Themba refers to is reflected by the extreme diversity of Sophiatown: rich living next to poor, slum co-existing with suburbia, gangs operating alongside religious organisations. Mattera agrees, maintaining that no visitor was ever left untouched by the magic of Sophiatown, or by the “madness that throbbed in its restless brain” (Mattera 1987: 80). He describes the township as a “multi-ethnic quilt”
(Mattera 1999: 5). When Sophiatown was demolished, this “multi-ethnic quilt” was destroyed, and along with it the myth, the magic, the inter-racial bohemia to which these writers aspired:

Something in me died, a piece of me died, with the dying of Sophiatown; it was the winter of 1958, the sky was a cold blue veil which had immersed in a bleaching solution and then spread out against a concave, the blue filtering through, and tinted by, a powder screen of grey; the sun, like the moon of the day, gave off more light than heat, mocking me with a promise of warmth – a fixture against the grey-blue sky – a mirror deflecting the heat and concentrating upon me in my Sophiatown only a reflection. (Modisane 1986: 5)

Modisane laments the destruction of his world, the loss of everything that used to be familiar to him. “We did not live in it”, he claims, “we were Sophiatown” (Modisane 1986: 9). To its inhabitants the destruction of Sophiatown was a symbol of the injustice they suffered at the hands of the Afrikaners who negated their human rights. “[T]he Boers … bulldozed Sophiatown” (Thema 1999: 13), killing the vibrancy of the ghetto, refilling it with white middle- to lower-class inhabitants:

The government has razed Sophiatown to the ground, rebuilt it, and resettled it with whites. And with appropriate cheek, they have called it Triomf. (Themba 1985: 64)

Verwoerd claimed that the government had ‘good intentions’, that separate development was equal to ‘good neighbourliness’, whereas, in fact, the Nationalists deprived their fellow human beings of the right to choose where they lived. The Group Areas Act of 1950 was considered by the Afrikaner Nationalists to be the cornerstone of apartheid. Residential separation was declared compulsory. Thousands of people were evicted from their homes, creating deep and justified resentment.

And still I wander among the ruins trying to find one or two of the shebeens that Dr. Verwoerd has overlooked. But I do not like the dead-eyes with which some of these ghost houses stare back at me. One of these days I, too, will get me out
The demise of Sophiatown was an anti-climax. In February 1956 Drum published a photograph which showed three men sitting on a pavement, playing dice. The scene was peaceful, but on a wall in the background is written in letters bleeding in paint, “WE WONT [sic] MOVE”. In interviews people claimed that feelings were running high, inhabitants were unhappy about the removals, but the defiance resulted in nothing:

“I mean Sophiatown is no more. The Boers bundled residents out of their homes and took them by force to a place called Meadowlands.”

“Why did they do that? What did the people do? What did the ANC do?” Kortboy asked anxiously.

La Luki shrugged. “You know these Boers are full of shit. There is a law they have passed that declared Sophiatown a white area. The people protested and there were plenty of meetings called by the ANC but the Boers brought in their soldiers and the big guns to remove the people by force. I tell you my friend, the people of Kofifi were crying like babies as they were taken away.”

Don Mattera recently gave a speech at Sparrow School in the renamed Sophiatown of post-apartheid South Africa. He reminisced how he had saved Hugh Masekela’s life (twice) in gang-related incidents in Sophiatown. He also clearly recalled his own involvement in gang-related violence, but stressed that the township had an essentially easy vibe (Davey, 2003). Decades before this speech Mattera had claimed that “nobody can write the real story of Sophiatown, the rise and fall of the township, the magic and wonderment of the place” (Mattera 1987: 49).

However, Can Themba, like his contemporaries, in the words of Es’kia Mphahlele, used Sophiatown as “a yardstick of what the South African non-white would read” (Mphahlele 1971: 188). They portrayed its subculture in their literary endeavours. Sophiatown had taken on a symbolic meaning, not only in politics, but also in literature. It served as inspiration, was given a voice in literature. And
especially Themba did, in a sense, write and rewrite the story several times, capturing both the vibrancy of the township as well as its tragedy.
CHAPTER THREE:

THE ‘POPULAR’ SHORT STORY:
“WET SENTIMENTAL SEXY” OR SOCIO-POLITICAL “YARDSTICK”?

“I walk up and down the streets of Sophiatown for hours, forming stories in the back of my mind. Then when I come to plan them – to write them down – they are in one piece ready to be written.”

(Themba 1953: 21)

During the 1950s and the early 1960s black South African writers, mostly school teachers and journalists, seem to have been forced by their environment to operate in the dominant genre of the short story. Es’kia Mphahlele is well known for claiming that the political and social climate of the apartheid era required “tremendous organization of one’s mental and emotional faculties” (Lindfors 1996: 3-4) in order to be able to write novels. Bloke Modisane agreed that environmental circumstances in South Africa during the 1950s forced black writers to adopt a ‘short-term morality’:

They have to live from day to day. You don’t know if the sun is going to shine tomorrow. Everything you do must be done today. Only today is important. You cannot budget for six months in order to write a novel. The short story, therefore, serves as an urgent, immediate, intense, concentrated form of unburdening yourself – and you must unburden yourself.

(Lindfors 1996: 4)
Literary activity at the time centred on Drum, which published most of the short stories by black writers of the period. The magazine, originally called The African Drum, was a monthly publication which was started in Cape Town in March 1951 by Robert Crisp. The first page carried the table of contents, the second a “Message from an African” – illiterate, stereotypically old, weather-beaten, wearing a hat, and the third the “Opinion”, exclaiming in capital letters that this was “A MAGAZINE OF AFRICA FOR AFRICA”. This ‘phrase’, it was somewhat condescendingly claimed, “recognise[s] the existence of more than 150,000,000 Bantu and Negro inhabitants of this continent whom we will attempt to reach for the first time in history with words that will express their thoughts, their impulses, their endeavours and, ultimately, their souls”. The editorial of the first issue was accompanied by a photograph of an African woman, naked above the waist, sitting next to a waterfall, with the caption “This is Africa!” The first few issues focused on tribal history, tribal music, farming, religion, sports: everything white editors thought would interest Africans. The editor, on behalf of the magazine, claimed to be apolitical, even warning readers about the ‘dangers’ of politics.

Not surprisingly, The African Drum did not sell. It was obvious that the target readership had been misjudged. Within the first few issues the magazine was moved to Johannesburg. In the September 1951 issue the directors, all white males, introduced a ‘referendum’ in which they asked readers to comment on which features they liked most and which they liked least in the magazine. According to Mike Nicol, Robert Crisp was a white liberal “too imbued with the concept of the noble savage” (Nicol 1991: 26). He had to go. Black reporters, who knew township life, were hired, as was a new editor, Anthony Sampson. Nicol claims Sampson knew nothing about either journalism or South Africa, so there were no preconceived ideas! An advisory board was introduced, consisting of Africans involved in sports (soccer and boxing) on management level, as well as organized politics (the ANC) and a coloured printer with an eye for cover-girls. The magazine was transformed into Drum, aimed at the working-class urban African. It contained articles on jazz, film stars, crime, boxing and beauty contests, but also short stories about love, passion, sex and gangsters. Whereas The African Drum had been what white men perceived Africans to be, Drum was what urban Africans really wanted to read in a popular magazine.
However, not everyone agreed. At the time Es’kia Mphahlele was one of Drum’s most severe critics. He admits to taking the job as journalist and literary editor because he needed the income:

I had no illusions at all about my inability to become a journalist. My whole outlook resisted journalism: my attitude towards the white press; towards the double stream of newspaper policy in South Africa where there is a press for whites and non-whites; towards Drum’s arbitrary standard of what the urban African wants to read: sex, crime and love stories; its use of Sophiatown as the yardstick of what the South African non-white should read … (Mphahlele 1971: 187-188)

On the other hand, Nicol claims that Drum “never pretended to be anything other than a popular magazine, with all that it implies” (Nicol 1991: 28). He admits that Jim Bailey wanted to avoid confrontational material, but also stresses that the Drum journalists were “writers first and political analysts afterwards” (Nicol 1991: 30). They were also young (most of them were under thirty) and inexperienced. Yet they were all talented and able to recreate their familiar world with its joys as well as its miseries in the form of popular short stories which reflected the social conditions of urban blacks in a world dominated by a minority white group. Bloke Modisane admits that at the time he was unaware of the social importance of these short stories:

I wrote innocuous short stories, escapist trash, about boxers with domestic problems, respectable pickpockets, hole-in-the-wall housebreakers, private detectives and other cardboard images of romanticism, and yet even against this background my escapist hero was seldom, if ever, on the side of formal law and order. Like me, my characters were invested with a contempt for the law, their efforts were directed towards a flaunting of the law; my heroes were social maladjusts in a society where heroism is measured by acts of defiance against law and order. I did not then recognise the sociological significance of what I was doing, that with a central idea behind them I could use my stories as a reflection or a study of our society. (Modisane 1986: 139)

Can Themba entered this world of Drum when he won the first prize of fifty pounds in the magazine’s short story competition in 1953. The prize was announced
in the April issue and one of the judges, Peter Abrahams, proposed that Themba’s short story, “Mob Passion”, showed “unusual literary promise”\(^5\). At the time Themba was a modest teacher, working at night in his one-room Sophiatown home until the early hours of the morning, claiming in the interview done by Henry Nxumalo, the assistant editor, that:

> I don’t drink, but smoke heavily, and of course … I like women, although I’m still a bachelor … Winning the DRUM contest, I feel inspired to go on writing until one day, perhaps, I’ll be a really famous author. \(\text{(Themba 1953: 21)}\)

“Mob Passion” earned Themba a position as staff writer for *Drum*, which published five more of his “wet sentimental sexy stories” (Mphahlele 1971: 188): “Passionate Stranger” (March 1953), “The Nice Time Girl” (May, 1954), “Forbidden Love” (November 1955), “Marta” (July 1956) and “The Urchin” (April 1963), as well as two ‘picture’ stories – posed photographs with captions written by Themba, as ‘interpretations’ of the photographs – “Baby Come Duze” and “Music Food of Love!” in April 1956 and August 1956 respectively. As the first photograph of Can Themba in *Drum* suggests, at the time of his appointment he was young, innocent and inexperienced. A mere fifteen years later he died of alcohol-induced thrombosis.

The plot of his first published, competition-winning short story, “Mob Passion”, is based on the familiar Shakespearean tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, adapted to contemporary township life riddled with crime. The two feuding families of the young lovers are represented by two township gangs, the Russians and the Letebeles. In the 1950s, gang-related violence was a stark reality well known to township dwellers. The crime of African against African was an everyday reality, a constant anxiety. Themba uses it as a backdrop for his tragedy. By realistically painting the grim social environment, he manages to create sympathy for his characters, whom he depicts so vividly that their humanity becomes real.

The first paragraph of “Mob Passion” immediately sets the scene: the constant, daily fear and discomfort experienced by train commuters. As this is well known to the readers of *Drum*, they are instantly gripped by it:
There was a thick crowd on Platform 2, rushing for the “All Stations” Randfontein train. Men, women and children were pushing madly to board the train. They were heaving and pressing, elbows in faces, bundles bursting, weak ones kneaded. Even at the opposite side people were balancing precariously to escape being shoved off the platform. Here and there deft fingers were exploring unwary pockets. Somewhere an outraged dignity was shrieking stridently, vilely cursing someone’s parentage. Fuller and fuller the carriages became. With a jerk the electric train moved out of the station. (Themba 1953: 23)

Having created a tense atmosphere of expectation, Themba, in the next paragraph, introduces the reader to the hero: a decent, upright character, who desires to better himself by education, but is unable to do so because of social restrictions. This description fits most of Themba’s readers: ordinary, respectable citizens, marginalized by an unfair education system:

“Whew!” blew Linga Sakwe. He gathered his few parcels upon his lap, pressing his elbows to his side pockets. He did not really have any valuables in these pockets; only long habit was working instinctively now. Linga was a tall, slender fellow, more man than boy. He was not particularly handsome, but he had those tense eyes of the young student who was ever innerly protesting against some wrong or other. In fact at the moment he was not a student at all. He was working for a firm of lawyers in Market Street. He hoped to save enough money in a year or two to return to university to complete an arts degree which he had been forced by “circumstances” to abandon. (Themba 1953: 23)

Themba is well aware that, despite a definite element of ‘literariness’ in his use of language, he is not writing for an ‘educated’ public. His is a ‘popular’ audience. They do not analyse what they read, but rather relate to it on an emotional level. He, therefore, appeals to their feelings. In the following two paragraphs the reader meets the heroine, and realizes that these two young people are obviously subjected to severe restrictions. Whatever happens in the rest of the short story, the reader’s sympathy for these two unfortunate lovers has been established:
People were still heaving about in the train, but Linga was not annoyed. He knew that by Langlaagte, or perhaps Westbury, most of these folk would be gone and he would be able to breathe again. At Braamfontein many people alighted: but he was not thinking of his discomfort any more. He was thinking of Mapula now. She had promised that she would be in time for this train. That depended, of course, on whether she succeeded to persuade the staff nurse in charge of the ward in which she worked to let her off a few minutes before time.

The train slowed down: Industria. Linga anxiously looked outside. Sure enough, there she was! He gave a wolf-whistle, as if he was admiring some girl he did not know. She hurried to his carriage, stepped in and sat beside him. They did not seem to know each other from Adam. An old man nearby was giving a lively narration in the grimmest terms of the murders committed in Newclare.

(Themba 1953: 23)

Having ensured the reader’s compassion, Themba slips into melodrama, probably because his subject matter is exceptionally grim: the everyday reality of crime and debauchery in the African community. This is a taste of the intensely vivid, sensational descriptions of violence to follow in the latter part of the story:

At Westbury the atmosphere was tense. Everybody crowded at the windows to see. Everywhere there were white policemen, heavily armed. The situation was “under control”, but everyone knew that in the soul of almost every being in this area raved a seething madness, wild and passionate, with the causes lying deep. No cursory measures can remedy; no superficial explanation can illuminate. These jovial faces that can change into masks of blood-lust and destruction with no warning, on the smallest provocation! There is a vicious technique faithfully applied in these riots. Each morning these people quietly rise, and with a business-like manner hurry to their work. Each evening they return to a Devil’s Party, uncontrollably drawn into hideous orgies. Sometimes the violence would subside for weeks or months and then suddenly would flare up at some unexpected spot, on some unexpected pretext.

(Themba 1953: 23)

Only then, after having created suspense, is the Romeo and Juliet theme – the reason why the hero and the heroine are forced to meet secretly – introduced to the reader:
At Newclare, too, from the train all seemed quiet. But Linga and Mapula knew the deceptive quiet meant the same even here. The train skimmed on, emptier. Only when they had passed Maraisburg did these two venture to speak to each other. Linga was Xhosa and Mapula Sotho. A Letebele and a Russian! They had to be very careful. Love in its mysterious, often ill-starred ways had flung them together.

(Themba 1953: 23)

It might be argued that Themba, with his penchant for the spectacular, is merely keen to tell a fantastic story in order to entertain his readers. However, although a Romeo and Juliet theme does indulge the lively imagination of an urban audience, the short story undeniably depicts the ‘human condition’ of African urban life. When the two lovers leave the train, they spend time alone in a deserted hiding place. Here Themba deliberately resorts to explicit melodramatic, naïve, romanticized generalizations in order to dramatize a young African couple’s game of love:

Only the little stream gurgled its nonsense; these two daring Hearts were lost in each other. The world, too – good, bad or indifferent – was forgotten in the glorious flux of their souls’ meeting and mingling.

“No, dear, nothing can reach and harm us here.” Then with a sigh: “Still, the cruellest [sic] thing they do is to drive two young people like guilty things to sneak off only to see each other. What is wrong with our people, Mapula?”

“Where there should be brotherhood and love, there are bitter animosities. Where there should be co-operation in common adversity, there are barriers of hostility, steeling a brother’s heart against a brother’s misery!”

“I believe God has a few of us to whom he whispers in the ear! Our true history is before us, for we yet have to build, to create, to achieve. Our very oppression is the flower of opportunity. If not for History’s Grand Finale, why then, does God hold us back? Hell! and here we are, feuding in God’s dressing room even before the curtain rises.”

(Themba 1953: 23)

Creating sympathy and support for the hero and heroine at the beginning of the short story is a successful device used in popular fiction. Themba, with little previous experience of popular writing, instinctively, and convincingly, follows this
method. He also introduces expectation – what will happen next – which keeps his readers interested.

The second part of “Mob Passion” is devoted to the ‘other side of the story’: Mapula’s family in the form of her uncles, Alpheus and Frans, “stalwarts in the Russian cause” (23). Once again, Themba starts dramatically when these two are informed by her brother, Thabo, about Mapula’s indiscretion. Just as Uncle Alpheus is expressing his disbelief, Mapula’s father, Ra-Thabo, is carried in, “unconscious … blood stream[ing] all over his face” (23). Again Themba describes the reality of township life – ‘justice’ as performed by street gangs. An excited crowd, consisting of mostly women, gathers outside the house, “prancing and drawn in by the irresistible suction of mob-feeling” (48), inciting Mapula’s family into action by chanting phrases. Modisane in his autobiography Blame Me on History refers to the undeniable power of crowds in African townships, specifically politicians trading on mob passions:

This chant never failed to work us up into a frenzy of enthusiasm, filling some with a sense of fervour, and others with hysteria; its primary significance was to rouse the rally into a noisy passion which released some of the anger bottled up inside us. (Modisane 1986: 106)

The third part of the short story provides the climax: the two parties meet face to face. The lovers, travelling back from their secret meeting place, are surprised, yet unalarmed by an unusual stop made by the train. They find their way back to the township over rough terrain, their biggest concerns being that Mapula’s uncomfortable shoes and that she should reach her home in time. Linga leaves her alone for a while and is confronted by a crowd of ‘Russians’. He manages to convince them that he is one of them. Just as the reader relaxes, yet another unexpected twist is introduced by Themba, successfully sustaining the tension:

As fate would have it, just then Mapula came running, shoes in hand and stockings twisted around her neck. “Linga, Linga, darling mine. What are they doing to you?” she screamed, as she forced her way through the crowd. When she came to him she flung her arms around him and clung to him with all her strength (Themba 1953: 48)
However, Mapula is unable to save Linga, who is swept away by the crowd and killed by her uncle Alpheus. A gruesome, vivid description follows when she in turn kills her uncle with an axe dropped by someone in the crowd:

With the axe in her hand, Mapula pressed through them until she reached the inner, sparser group. She saw Alpheus spitting upon Linga’s battered body. He turned with a guttural cackle – “He-he-he! He-he-he!” – into the descending axe. It sank into his neck and down he went. She stepped on his chest and pulled out the axe. The blood gushed out all over her face and clothing. That evil-looking countenance she gradually turned to the stunned crowd, half lifting the axe and moving slowly but menacingly towards the largest group.

They retreated – a hundred and twenty men and women retreated before this devil-possessed woman with the ghastly appearance. But then she saw the mangled body of the man she loved and her nerve snapped. The axe slipped from her hand and she dropped on Linga’s body, crying piteously …

(Themba 1953: 48)

Urban violence was well known to 1950s readers of Drum, as was superstition. But so also was empathy. The crowd, realising that Mapula had acted instinctively because of her love for Linga, wails with her, “Jo-o! Jo-o! Jonana-jo!” (Themba 1953: 48).

Drum encouraged short stories which presented an image of Africans as uncomplicated sentimentalists with a tendency towards violence in love and temper. Admittedly, “Mob Passion” seems sensational and naïve, even gruesome and improbable. However, the startling realism of Themba’s descriptions, although undeniably spectacular, reflects definite elements of urban black culture of the 1950s. An article published as early as the October 1951 issue of African Drum, “Inside Johannesburg’s Underworld”, informed the reader that

“[E]very African on the Reef knows the miseries and terrors of the Crime City; they know what it is to be imprisoned in their own homes, and do not dare to cross the road alone. They know how even in broad daylight they may be assaulted, robbed and stripped, and yet have no means to retaliate; they know how even in their daily journey to and from work they run the risk of encountering thieves, thugs and murderers.” (Drum 1951: 5)
The same article claimed that “the people who organize and control the underworld are the various criminal gangs, whose ultimate aim is to dominate the whole city” (1951: 7). “Mob Passion” is based on the topical issue of gang-fights. The humanity of the popular ‘love conquers all’ theme is positioned against the sociological issue of black on black violence as an ‘obstacle’. Themba’s images may seem sensational, but, considering that they represent a community in which “every other African will have been assaulted once in his life”, they are, in fact, sober and real. A relatively inexperienced Themba initiates a black urban voice by imaginatively ‘re-inventing’ the harsh reality of the violence and hardship of township life. He exploits the reader’s expectation of tragedy by, right at the beginning of the short story, giving a taste of the inevitable violent outcome of an impossible love relationship. Chapman believes that, “Themba avoids exploring the sociological record” as “individual humanity is simply placed in opposition to ‘mob passion’ ” (Chapman 1989: 21). However, he does admit that the overall effect of “Mob Passion” is a successful depiction of the black urban experience in a compassionate light.

Themba’s first short story, “Passionate Stranger”, had been published in Drum a month earlier (March 1953). It addresses the issue of outdated tribal traditions in a modern urban society. Unlike “Mob Passion”, its style is light and witty, although it deals with a serious issue in the 1950s black community: a daughter’s defiance of her father’s wishes because of her love for a man. Themba makes extensive use of dialogue, which contributes to the feeling of straightforward honesty created by his storytelling. Whereas “Mob Passion”, which illustrates the daily battle for survival in a township subjected to extreme urban violence, is heavy drama, “Passionate Stranger” is light-hearted, witty romantic escapism.

Osbourne Ledawa takes his friend, Reginald Tshayi, home with him for a short holiday. Osbourne’s father is hostile towards Reginald, branding him a Jo’burg tsotsi. When Reginald meets Osbourne’s sister, the beautiful Ellen, the ‘inevitable’ happens: love at first sight. The fact that Ellen’s hand in marriage, according to tribal custom, has been promised to Dikgang, the chief’s son, does not affect their sexual passion for each other, which is described in romanticized terms by Themba:
They lay in each other’s arms long and still, silently contemplating this thing the gods had done. The first storm of passion spent, a great peace descended on them as soul met soul in perfect unity, and their bodies intertwined like a woven whip. Deep meaning suffused their union so that perfect understanding was achieved. And they were one.

(Themba 1953: 24)

The two lovers try to hide their feelings, but Osbourne’s father is not easily fooled. He is determined to get rid of the “Jo’burg tsotsi”. First he chases Reginald away, and when this does not work, he reminds Ellen of her duty to marry Dikgang. She defiantly replies, “Go marry him yourself” (24). The father tries to persuade Osbourne to talk to his sister, but he refuses. As a last resort the old man invites the chief’s council to discuss the bride price, hoping against all odds that his daughter will submit to custom after all. However, Osbourne is on his sister’s side. In the company of the chief’s delegation, as well as Reginald, whom his father has asked to be present, expecting the negotiations to go according to his plan, Osbourne unexpectedly suggests that the chief’s party should meet Ellen:

“I think we should display our wares before these gentlemen commit themselves to a purchase. I’m sure they’d like to see the girl.” He said it so simply that the counsellors were impressed with his figure of speech: only his father and his friend knew its stinging lash. (Themba 1953: 25)

The father tries to stop it, but the chief’s counsellors agree that they would like to meet the girl in question. Ellen seals her own fate in her favour by speaking to the delegation, against her father’s wishes:

“You are here to make me a wife to Dikgang. What I think of him is entirely irrelevant. But you must know that I belong to another, not so much from the willfulness of my rebel heart, but because by the law of man and God, I cannot go to any man, but the man I love, as a virgin.” (Themba 1953: 25)

On this dramatic note she leaves the room. As is expected the marriage is called off and Ellen gets her “Jo’burg tsotsi”.
Because of the easy style and the witty slant of the short story, the reader might be led to believe it to be merely a light-hearted tale of modern love triumphing over traditionally arranged marriages. However, Themba, a so-called “New African” (Chapman 1989: 23), who was familiar with English literature, in this short story creates sophisticated, liberated characters with a sense of humour, who manipulate their circumstances rather than resort to violence. Themba names them Osbourne, Reginald and Ellen – conspicuously Western names – illustrating that the urban black is asserting an identity which defies tribal custom. These deliberately chosen names show the growth of sophisticated urban working and bourgeois classes, despite oppressive laws. “Passionate Stranger” dramatizes the growing confidence of the urban African population. Chapman points out that Themba “increasingly affected a style of coinages and idiosyncratic turns of phrase, in which English was wilfully distorted and made to mock and challenge any conforming view” (Chapman 1989: 24). In this respect Themba, in search of the black urban voice, makes use of the opportunities available to him: the popular press in the form of Drum. He creates a seemingly light-hearted tale with huge public appeal. Yet he carefully chooses his subject matter, as he is acutely aware of the urban black’s aspiration to defeat the Nationalist Party’s branding of Africans as ‘ignorant kaffirs’, returning them to their distant tribal reserves. Schadeberg recalls how Themba and his colleagues openly rejected their tribal roots:

The time was different. The more educated black I would think was more educated than the well-educated black today, because they went to missionary schools. They used good English and they saw themselves as international citizens, as Africans as well, but they saw themselves as looking outwards. They wanted to be detribalised and did not believe in tribalism. The fifties writers were more widely read than the black authors of today – Dickens and Shakespeare. It is quite possible that Can Themba did not speak an African language. Or he refused to. They believed to be tribal was something from the past, and the future was to be international, looking at international literature and so on. Be part of the new world. (Schadeberg 2002: 111)

Bloke Modisane, in his autobiography, Blame Me on History, claimed that “my father and my forefathers and the ancestral gods of my fathers had failed me.”
These ‘New Africans’ knew they were not alone in their desire to rid themselves of the negative, morally destructive Afrikaner label:

I wanted to rise above the messenger bicycle and the back door; what I did not realise is that I would never, in South Africa, be able to rise above the limitations imposed upon me by my colour, more eloquently articulated by Dr Verwoerd; Natives should not be allowed to rise above certain levels of labour.

(Modisane 1986: 81)

With ‘Passionate Stranger’, it would seem, Themba carefully chose his subject matter. On the one hand it is a typical Drum short story, representing the experiences of the new urban South African black. But on the other hand it is not merely a straightforward story about a romantic hero and heroine who overcome the obstacles in their way in order to ‘live happily ever after’, but rather an example of the new, upcoming black literature which ultimately reflected the black urban culture. In this respect it reflects Gready’s claim that the Drum stories were a ‘mixture of genuine quality writing and the most ephemeral trash imaginable’ (Gready 1990: 144).

Once again drawing on the same societal raw material, Themba, in the catchy opening line of “The Nice Time Girl”, published in Drum in May 1954, “Damn it all, I’m going to the party” (30), immediately captures his reader’s attention. The rest of the first paragraph sketches the frustration of Eunice Maoela, a woman from Pretoria, who is married to an absent husband who is too old and “too cold” (30) for her. “So she put on a sheath costume with a provocative slit along one leg, and went to the party” (30). Jealous husbands suspecting their wives of infidelity, husbands with errant wives, wives who are thinking of straying, mothers-in-law who do not like their son’s wives … Themba certainly has his audience in anticipation! Eunice, predictably, meets another man at the party: a “Johannesburg jive king” (30) who immediately upon seeing her asks her for a dance: “Baby,” he said, “what you got don’t matter; it’s what you give – now c’mon give! give! give!” snapping his fingers at each “give” and swaying his knees slowly” (30). And of course Eunice ‘gives’. But when Matthew Modise introduces himself at the end of the dance, she gets cold feet: “After all, Johannesburg boys are dangerous!” (30). The “Johannesburg jive king” (30), realizing this, urges her on: “I didn’t expect Pretoria dames could jive like that.
Baby, you’re hot stuff” (30). What happens next is even more predictable. After dancing some more, he suggests that they “blow to some cosy spot” (30) and impulsively she takes him home and spends the night with him, confiding in the playboy about her unhappy life. He urges her to “chance it” (30) with him:

 “…you don’t see the blues’ll [sic] get you. Maybe not now, maybe not tomorrow, but they’ll get you right enough. And then you’ll grab any worm that comes along. It ain’t gonna be me, it ain’t gonna be no guy you go for, cos you’re just gonna be goddam desperate. Me too, I’m gonna go to pieces, thinkin of you, and maybe just snatch any tart that comes my way. And two lives’ll be busted.” (Themba 1954: 30)

In spite of his plea, Eunice refuses, claiming that her conscience and her young son prevent her: “My boy means more to me than nice time s” (30). Matthew returns to Johannesburg, Eunice’s husband, Theophilus, comes home for the weekend, and the inevitable happens: the contrast between him and her new young lover is too much for her to bear. When Theophilus leaves, she visits Matthew, spending three days with him and thoroughly enjoying herself. Three weeks later, at the weekend when her husband is at home, Eunice suggests that they take a walk to try to “rediscover the old magic of our love” (31). Before the evening walk, however, Eunice slips out for a while. That evening something terrible happens:

Suddenly out of the tall grass leapt four or five strange evil-looking men on Eunice’s side. She screamed, but the shock must have been too sudden for her voice to go far. Theophilus sprang to her defense, and when the attack struck he fought with bare hands. But the odds were too great for him, and he was clubbed unconscious. Then the butchers stabbed him to death in cold, greasy blood. After that, gloved hands went through his pockets, turned them inside out, but only found small change. The motive looked like robbery. (Themba 1954: 31)

Although the murder is an unexpected dramatic twist, Themba does provide obvious clues to his readers that Eunice and Matthew plan to kill Theophilus: Eunice commits adultery, she is bored with her husband and excited by her new lover, and she slips out before she takes Theophilus to a deserted spot where Matthew and a
band of hired criminals kill him. The identity of the killers and Eunice’s participation in the murder are not, however, revealed to the reader until right at the end, when she unexpectedly confesses to Detective Mphahlele, “Yes, I did it! I did it! Life with my husband had become intolerable!” (33). She does this only after the detective has told her the facts of the case – the one man who does not have a criminal record claimed that he had been hired by a woman to get rid of Theophilus – obviously realizing that it is only a matter of time before the detective puts two and two together.

The short story ends with – what Themba probably thought was a witty conclusion – a moralizing, condescending remark by the detective: “That night Detective Mphahlele asked his wife, ‘I wonder why Beauty sometimes becomes the Beast?’” (33).

A popular trend in the 1950s was to copy film stars. Anthony Sampson described Arthur Maimane as the “complete Hollywood journalist” (Nicol 1991: 114), as he copied not only the dress, but also the mannerisms, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, and the stereotypical ‘cynical’ facial expression, the ‘sardonic look’ associated with the Hollywood ‘cool guys’. The urban blacks of the 1950s, Themba’s readers, it seems, were ardent about Hollywood films, and they adored anything American:

If Hollywood had intended to influence the development of a particular kind of person, I am that product; the tinsel morality, the repressed violence, the technicolor dreams, these are the things I absorbed in the name of culture. (Modisane 1986: 172)

Themba fully exploits the kind of escapism provided by Hollywood films, romanticizing the fact that Eunice is ‘driven’ to get rid of her boring husband, by using an Americanized form of slang in the dialogue of “The Nice Time Girl”. The short story undoubtedly does not escape the category of “wet sentimental sexy stories” (Mphahlele 1971: 188), which satisfied the popular reader’s taste. The plot is predictable, the characters are stereotypical, even one-dimensional. Eunice is a typical lonely housewife, Matthew a typical playboy and Mphahele a typical detective – in an American film. However, although the story is relatively far removed from the daily struggle of urban black survival, a common social phenomenon is addressed: the woman with ‘loose morals’, popularly known among 1950s urban blacks as the ‘nice-
time girl’. Dancing, partying, and especially excessive drinking and promiscuity, were popular forms of escapism from the harsh daily reality of struggle and suffering:

But there is always the kwela and the nice-time when we surround ourselves with people, screaming noises almost as if to convince ourselves of our existence, in a glorification of our living at a feverish pitch, on our nervous system; at our nice-times, to the orgiastic rhythms of the kwela we conglomerate into an incestuous society where sex becomes promiscuous and friendship explodes into murderous hatred. The penny whistle band picks up a tune – a rhythm, to – and the music swells, the emotions rise and the imagination waxes, then suddenly – for a brief moment only – the noise is stilled, then another kind of noise rises first tentatively, then swells until the music can no longer be heard; it is a noise which is a mixture of Hollywood films and the sounds which are not words but moods of the feeling required to transport us into an existence where white South Africa is mother planet in another galaxy and apartheid becomes a sound in a nightmare … Our bodies become obsessed and possessed by the rhythms; time is frozen, memory is obliterated…

(Modisane 1986: 117-118)

“The Nice Time Girl” may not be one of Themba’s most convincing short stories in terms of social reality, as it undeniably uses the romantic escapism reminiscent of the American comic book fiction of the time. However, it does have the essential ingredients of dramatic writing: tightness of plot, emphasis on the most essential ingredients of plot, extensive use of dialogue, especially popular urban discourse, and an unexpected, shocking ending. By dramatizing the desperate ways in which people are ‘driven’ to deal with unacceptable daily circumstances, Themba creates a black urban voice speaking of aspirations to a better life. The issues addressed in “The Nice Time Girl” are, admittedly, not political. However, they do reflect a fundamental human desire for social change.

“Forbidden Love”, published in November 1955, is, once again, about two lovers who have to hide their feelings: the man, Michael, is black and the woman, Dora, coloured. The style seems melodramatic, almost saccharine:

His lips thrilled upon hers, burning sweet …

“Why wasn’t it I, Mike? Why wasn’t I dark, instead of fair. Then you might
not have been so afraid of my love?” (Themba 1955:50)

... let’s forget all the world’s fear. Let’s forget even your fear and mine. Between you and me, there is, lying side by side with the fear, a faith. Let’s feed the faith. Let’s talk of love.”

“No, Sweetie, let’s not talk of love, let’s just lie still in each other’s arms, and feel it.” (53)

The theme of fear is woven through the whole short story. The two lovers are, inevitably, exposed when Dora’s younger brother, Bobby, is told at his school that “Your Sissy goes with a Naytiff [sic]!” (53). A fight follows and the teacher, Meneer Careels, who is in love with Dora, finds out. He convinces the principal that her family has to be told, and, against the principal’s wishes, proceeds to tell the whole community of the ‘scandal’:

Dora’s disgrace was on everybody’s lips. To everybody, except Dora herself, this was a disaster. She decided that it was a release from the long months of stolen, forbidden love. And there was a thrill in defiance. (Themba 1955: 55)

Dora’s older brother, David, and some of his friends beat up Michael. Michael’s sister, Salome, with whom he shares a two-bedroomed dwelling in Sophiatown, promises to put an end to the unpleasant situation. She tells Dora’s family that David had had an affair with her, that she had produced a child, and that he refused to acknowledge the child or pay any maintenance for it. For the first time Dora’s mother, who is black, breaks her silence about the situation: “My grandchild! I’ve got a grandchild. My God, I must see that child” (55). The short story ends on an undeniably sentimental, moralizing note: “Michael and Dora walked out quietly. She looked into his eyes and said: ‘Somehow I think fear will fade away now.’” (55).

Although “Forbidden Love”, on the surface, seems to be a popular short story of the ‘true confessions’ kind, Can Themba’s style, once again, takes its strength from the social reality of its subject matter. His reading public was obviously familiar with defiant survival. Ordinary events, like difficult, prohibited relationships, did continue while people were struggling to survive. They either confronted the situation, in this case positively by defiantly telling the truth, or they tried to escape from it by excessive drinking, violence or crime. The dislocations of black urban life do demand
spectacular, imaginative, dramatic presentation. Government legislation against mixed marriages and interracial social mixing (Act No 55 of 1949: Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act and Act No 21 of 1950: Immorality Amendment Act) was a reality of the Nationalist Government of the 1950s. The so-called ‘re-classification’ of coloureds as either black or white, depending on the fairness or darkness of their skin, was one of the most humiliating practices of the Afrikaner Nationalists in fascist pursuit of racial purity. Chapman believes that “Forbidden Love” “implicitly questions the commitment of coloureds to identify with the oppression of African people” (Chapman 1989: 214). Once again Themba’s imaginative style transcends the category of what Mphahlele believed to be the typical Drum short story, the “wet sentimental sexy stories” (Mphahlele 1971: 188), as he dramatically illustrates the grim reality of loving someone of a different race in South Africa in the 1950s.

With “Marta”, published in Drum in July 1956, Themba moves away from the category of popular short story to that of anecdote. He depicts Marta, the hopeless alcoholic, who neglects her child, who cannot escape from the compulsion of her addiction, with stark realism, but also with extreme compassion. Gone is the sentimental approach, the moralizing, the melodrama. Instead the reader is touched by Themba’s extraordinary gift for creating atmosphere, which would characterize his later increasingly autobiographical short stories and anecdotes. Marta’s desperate behaviour, which results in the severe neglect of her child, evokes sympathy rather than contempt. Sylvester Stein in Who Killed Mr Drum?? [sic] admits that:

There has been no one I have admired more, in a lifetime of mixing with the great and the little, than Canadoce [sic] Dorsay von Themba, and no one I have hoped more to see fulfilled. A man of great reading, a working philosopher, a witty and wise companion, gifted editor and writer, he had the one serious fault. This was, of course, his weakness for drink, partly to be excused by reason of his adopted philosophy – existentialism. Glass after glass of ‘KB’ (as kaffir-beer was known in euphemistic circles), *shimiyan*, Pin-Up (pineapple gin) and that doubtful whisky served in a lemonade bottle were his refuge from the frustrations of life on the wrong side of the colour line. (Stein 2000: 75)

Like Themba, Marta is unable to cope with the severity of her life in a sober state: ‘[Life] is like a burning log that crackles at every knot and explodes in little
bursting pellets of fire. The pain or the slow-creeping sorrow. The sudden fear of dark location alleys. The shifting aside to avoid the attention of young hooligans who sit and swear on the street corners” (41).

Marta drinks excessively and her husband, Jackson, is a philanderer. They are both victims of “the tawdry, vulgar, violent recklessness of their lives” (41). When Marta is tempted by friends to visit a shebeen, she unconvincingly tries to resist, but, not surprisingly, gives in and goes. At the shebeen they buy “a bottle of brandy that looked like guilty blood” (41). In the dining room of the shebeen, a young man is practising jazz solos on a set of drums, beating them “as though he wanted to work something evil out of him” (41). Marta, who cannot resist the rhythm of the drums, jumps up and jives, moving “like a creature drawn irresistibly, half-consciously, to its doom” (41). The music has a weird effect on both Marta and the young boy:

The drummer was watching her now. Their positions were reversed. It was she who was giving him direction now. She was transmitting the wild energy, with clenched teeth and open hands, creeping towards him. Her every sudden movement tore a roar from the drums.
    Then abruptly she stopped, and the cymbals clanged!

Marta sank tiredly into a chair. She felt that she had come back from somewhere, had committed something before which her spirit had quailed. She didn’t want to dance again, or drink any more. She looked at the boy behind the drums. He seemed very shy, very young. Could he, could he really be that innocent even after this thing he and she had done together?  (Themba 1956: 45)

When Marta’s friend, Sophia, asks the boy to join them, indicating that she wants to sleep with him, Marta feels explicity protective towards him:

Somehow she felt this boy should not be dragged into their company. There was something about him that she felt with stupid stubbornness, should be left intact.
    “No!” Marta was surprised at the violence of her own voice.

Marta caught the boy by the sleeve of his floral shirt.
    “Let’s get away from here! Quick!” The urgency in her voice impelled him.  (Themba 1956: 45)
Realising that she is drunker than she had thought, Marta asks the boy to take her home, urging him to promise her that he will never drink. Tragedy inevitably strikes, as Marta relates to her friend, Sophia, afterwards:

“Maybe it’s true I was fed-up with Jackson. Maybe I did want in my heart to make Jackson feel that other men could like me. But not with that boy, Sophia. Not with that boy.

“Now the people say, ‘No case at all’. No case at all because he was in my own house. In Jackson’s own house, and Jackson had a right to kill him. But there’s nothing that he did.”

Sophia felt for a moment like laughing lecherously. But somehow she just couldn’t. She just couldn’t.

Softly she asked, “But you loved that boy, didn’t you?”

Marta looked up through her tears. She looked at Sophia long before she decided that Sophia might understand.

Then just: “Yes. The drunk woman’s child has fallen.”

(Themba 1956: 45)

These, the closing lines of the short story, are echoed by the opening lines:

The people in the queue stood drearily with an air of defeat waiting over them. Sophiatown on Monday mornings is like that. An anti-climax after Sunday’s excesses.

Then Marta came along still drunk. Her baby was hanging dangerously on her back as she staggered up Victoria Road.

Somebody in the queue remarked drily, “S’ funny how a drunk woman’s child never falls.”

(Themba 1956: 41)

The emotional trauma of the black urban experience of the 1950s townships is heightened by Themba’s ability to play on the reader’s sympathies. However, given the original context of the harsh reality of the day, one hesitates to classify “Marta” as melodrama. In this short story, Themba draws on societal raw material to illustrate the black urban culture of his day. “Marta” is an example of the blurred line in Drum between popular melodrama and quality writing. Modisane in Blame Me on History claims that: “I directed my energy to my writing, determined to use it as the weapon for gate-crashing into the worlds which rejected me” (Modisane 1986: 88).

This is clearly what Can Themba did when he wrote “Marta”. Although the autobiographical traces which appear in his later works are absent, one can assume that Marta’s knowledge that she was destroying her self-respect, as well as her desire to stop drinking, are Themba’s own feelings. In “Marta”, Themba’s own search for
identity in an oppressive society becomes evident. Gone are the elements of escapism. In its place is the creation of a stark urban reality, an urban identity, and, ultimately, a resistance to the fragmented reality of a contemporary society.

“The Urchin”, published much later in April 1963, deals with juvenile delinquency. Four young boys, Macala, Dipapang, Jungle and Boy-Boy, roam the streets of “just the denuded places the Demolition Squad had left in Sophiatown” (Themba 1963: 31). They model themselves on township gangs, but are not quite organized enough to do more than minor mischief: “Together, they should have been ‘Our Gang’ but their organization was not tight enough for that” (31).

The four boys stage mock battles and tell each other dramatic stories of gang crimes, the gangsters and tsotsis being their heroes. Jungle urges the rest to “go finish off da Berliners” (31). They walk from street to street, as if they were a posse: “The bigger tsotsis watched them with pride, and shouted encouragements like: Da men who rule da town! and Tomorrow’s outees!” (33).

The further they go, the more supporters follow them. By the time they reach the part of Sophiatown called Berlin, they have a miniature army following them. Macala divides his ‘men’ into two groups, sending Jungle to flush out the Berliners, who will then run right into the second group awaiting them. While running Jungle repeatedly stabs a rather big boy, as is later related to the rest by Boy-Boy, who witnessed it. The fight is in full swing when the police arrive on the scene, sending the whole lot scattering. The police do not bother making any arrests. They are “satisfied with merely clearing the street” (33). As the four friends gather to discuss the fight, the ‘news’ arrives: one of the boys was killed and “de Berliners are going to call in de Big Berliners” (33). This does not scare them. However, the ‘news’ that they are to be questioned by the police does, because they have heard about the corporal punishment given at police stations:

“Dey say two huge cops hold you down over a big bench an you got nothin’ on. You can’t move. Now, maybe de magistrate he said: ‘Six cuts’. Dat’s nothin’. If you cry, for every one you get two …”

(Themba 1963: 33)
Macala, too scared to go home, spends the night in a deserted timber yard, not hearing his mother frantically calling: “Mac-a-a-a-la! Mac-a-a-a-la! Hai, that child will one day bring me trouble” (35).

“The Urchin” was published after Themba had left the staff of Drum. A “taut, gripping tale of life as it was in old Sophiatown … it was one of the eight prize winning stories in a contest organized by the South African Centre of the International Pen Club and open to writers of all races in South Africa.” (Themba 1963: 29). Describing the inevitable fate awaiting an informal gang of young boys, trapped in their circumstances, Themba uses a hybrid style, combining the vigour of the African speech with the rhythm and imagery of tsotsitaal, a Pidgin-English that evolved in the townships to fulfil the need for a common language among blacks from different ethnic groups. “The Urchin” illustrates the fate of youngsters experiencing a sense of loss (after the destruction of Sophiatown), of not belonging anywhere, of realizing that they probably never will.

Admittedly these six short stories are about love, crime and violence – the kind favoured by Drum. They all, undeniably, contain sensational and melodramatic elements. However, they are all about Africans in the turbulent 1950s, and they address the social reality of their problems: tsotsis, slum environments, urban crime, problematic love relationships, adultery, alcohol abuse, racial discrimination, fragmented family life, lack of education. The style is “racy, agitated and impressionistic” (Mphahlele 2002: 308). The form is ‘popular’, but also realistic and hard-hitting. This is not traditional ‘pulp fiction’. It is a minute-to-minute record of survival in a marginalized society.
Another way of recording black urban images and values is the ‘picture story’. These can almost be regarded as ‘mini movies’, using photographs and captions to tell a story. In “Baby Come Duze”, published in Drum April 1956, there are two actors: “Susan Gabashane stars as ELLEN” (61) and “Ronnie Manyosi stars as PRETTYBOY” (61). A short synopsis is provided: “There’s a new lingo in the townships, bright as the bright-boys, made of Afrikaans, Zulu, Sotho, English and brand-new words. Here’s a story in lingo – and explanations!” (61).

The lingo is tsotsitaal, an English Pidgin which evolved in the urban townships, especially the Reef area. It was understood by most urban blacks and reflected the new cosmopolitan environment. Its main source was Afrikaans, as the suffix ‘taal’, as well as most of the words used in the patois, indicate. This was probably because blacks had closer social contact with lower-class Afrikaners than with English-speaking whites. Apart from black languages like Zulu and Sotho, some English and Americanisms were included, the latter borrowed from popular films and jazz – two major township recreational pastimes.

The first photo sees a smartly dressed Ellen walking past Prettyboy and his friend, Snooky:

Snooky: “Jy val babies bo. Daai’s die Casbah Boys se rubberneck, en sy vat nie moegoes kop-toe nie.”
Pretty-boy: “Get a load of that one, Snooky. That’s the genuine article. Get it?”
Snooky: “You go for every skirt. That girl belongs to the Casbah Boys, and won’t go for suckers.” (Themba 1956: 61)

But Prettyboy takes his chances and approaches Ellen:

Prettyboy: “Ek sê, baby, ‘n man pitch cruel vir jou. Punyuka ek net, dan hol ons die toun toe”
Ellen: “Jy’s babies verskrik, hè! Wat gaan vir wat en wie gaan vir wie? Ou Bull van die Casbahs maak jou hinty, finish en klaar. Daak!”
Prettyboy: “I say, baby, I’m nuts about you. Give me a break, and you and I will paint the town red.”
Ellen: “You’re girl-crazy, eh! What’s cooking? Bull of the Casbah Boys will kill you off, finish and flat, Scoot?” (63)

However, Ellen has fallen for Prettyboy, for the next photo sees her alone at home, relaxing on a couch, admitting to herself:
Ellen: “Toe was ek mix-up van die out-tie, maar ek nyekeza. Ek was gestoot. Ou Bull is coward met ‘n gounie, en hy neinen net vir molle. My Mma hoor my, is Jozi die!”

Ellen: “But I fell hard for the bright-boy. Still I played angel. I was concerned. Bull is cruel with a knife, and goes to jail just through dames. Goodness, this is Joburg!”

In the next photograph Ellen’s gangster boyfriend, inevitably, confronts Prettyboy, grabbing him by the collar, threatening him:

Bull: “Jy deal met my moll, spy. Pazama weer by daai cherry, dan quip ek jou vuil.”
Bull: “You string with my girl, small-fry. Just dare go near that dame and I’ll beat you up bad.”

In the next three photographs bystanders encourage Prettyboy to fight for Ellen and Prettyboy judo-throws Bull:

“'n Shot maak jou nie wild as jy Judo notch nie, man. Ga hom voor hom hele laities…”
“A bigshot can’t scare you if you know Judo. Grab him in front of all his boys …”
“Spin hom; hy moet brul soos ‘n os as hy vlie want hulle is almal sissies as jy pluck hou.”
“Throw him; he must roar like an ox when he flies for they’re all cowards when you show courage.”
“Die Here weet, die dikker die vark die harder val hy.”
“God knows, the bigger the pig the harder it drops.”

Prettyboy wins Ellen’s hand, as is indicated by two photographs showing them lying in each other’s arms under a tree and standing under a lamp post at night. They “dadla tot die beeste romantic word”/”spooned till even the cattle became romantic” (67) and plan the sex of their baby in a happily-ever-after scenario in the last photograph, which sees a laughing Ellen doing the washing.

On the surface “Baby Come Duze” is pure entertainment. It manages, with a series of photographs and descriptive captions in dialogue form, to tell a love story with the typical ‘triangle theme’ of popular fiction, in which the ‘outsider’ gets the girl and they live happily ever after. However, Themba almost certainly intended to familiarize his readers with tsotsitaal, illustrating the tremendous energy generated in
urban areas inhabited by black South Africans. The lighthearted way in which the picture story unfolds is far from a deliberate waste of intellectual energy on trivialities, but rather an acute interest in social behaviour.

In “Music, Food of Love!”, published in Drum in August 1957, Can Themba, once again with photographs and captions, tells the story of how, one Friday, he was “walking along, minding my own business, when I saw two people looking out of two windows in the same house … so the drama began” (65). In one of the windows he ‘sees’ an unknown girl reading a sad letter, which made her cry: “It gave her the blues so that long into the night she brooded over the guy who had jilted her …” (65). Then suddenly, “the soft moaning sounds of a saxophone broke through her in delicious despair” (65). It was coming from the next window: a “new arrival was rehearsing his blues… unknowing what effect he was having” (Themba 1956: 65). She heard him again the next night, “pour[ing] … all the yearning and desire for achievement in his youth … into his sax” (67). As he came out of the door the next day she rushed to her window to “see the man who had suffered from life or love” (67). That same night she “made herself up for him” (69) and when he came home she rushed to the door and invited him to her room, where she made him play his saxophone for her. A “sweet night of musical love” (69) followed as he “set her heart on fire” (69). They fell in love and “out they went, a-loving and a-trusting each other, unafraid of the hard, cruel world waiting outside for young people in love” (69).

Like “Baby Come Duze”, “Music Food of Love!” tells an entertaining, lighthearted fairy tale romance, reminiscent of the popular American films of the 1950s. In this case two lonely strangers, who have both suffered emotional hurt in the past, fall in love. They are brought together by music, a popular theme in films. The happy endings in both picture stories are unreal, sentimental descriptions of what people would have liked their lives to be. However, paradoxically, the photographic depictions make these romantic tales seem more probable, as the reader identifies with the characters in much the same way the audience identifies with situations in a film. These light-hearted stories indulge the lively imagination of township dwellers while at the same time illustrating the magical quality of Sophiatown, the dream world of aspirations, the fantasy of ‘happily ever after’. 
Lewis Nkosi in his obituary recalled how Can Themba had something ominous in his detachment, something desperate in his wit: “in order to survive and in order to conceal the scars, [he] laughed, clowned, mocked” (Nkosi 1985: vii). In his later short stories, after leaving Drum, Themba “grew more ironical and colloquial, affecting to beat the system with a mocking cynicism and an extreme cultural ‘underworldism’ of the African township” (viii). He still, like in the popular Drum short stories, addresses the daily plight of the township black, but with more intensity, more agitation, more confrontation.

“The Suit”, Themba’s best-known short story, will only be briefly discussed. It has been reworked not only into a play in English as well as French, but also recently into a dance drama. It has the fable-like quality of an urban legend, telling the story of a young married couple, Philemon and Mathilda, who live in apartheid-era Sophiatown. Every morning Philemon, a thoughtful, sensitive husband, who is very much in love with his wife, spoils her with breakfast in bed, after doing the morning chores, before leaving for work. Philemon loves this routine and is basically happy with his circumstances, although they are not perfect, mainly because he has Mathilda. However, one morning at the bus stop, he is told that Mathilda has a lover who visits her every day after Philemon has left. He rushes back home, discovering the man in bed with his wife. The man flees, leaving his suit in the bedroom. Philemon is a changed man. He never mentions the adultery, but insists that Mathilda treat the discarded suit as an honoured guest, setting a place for it at the table, taking it for a walk on one occasion, and, the ultimate insult to Mathilda, entertaining it at her party. After the party Philemon goes drinking and, in his absence, his wife, who cannot live with the humiliation any longer, commits suicide. Philemon’s punishment of Mathilda is to remind her constantly of her adultery, by insisting on the constant physical presence of the suit. It is unforgiving, absurdly severe and frighteningly repressive, slowly and completely destroying a previously free-spirited woman. When Philemon realizes that Mathilda has committed suicide as the only way out of this destructive relationship, he cries out for her in “screwish anguish” (46), but it is, of course, too late.

Although “The Suit” can certainly be classified as a popular short story, Themba does not make use of the sensational images of his Drum stories. He does, however, twist the events to obtain the sympathy of his readers, indirectly heightening
the sentiment. This may seem as an attempt to make his readers cry, but Themba is not resorting to melodrama. He is, in fact, by consciously and explicitly making use of the entertainment medium of appealing, popular stories, re-creating the seriousness of the black urban experience of the day.

Far more serious, and with less ‘entertainment value’, “Kwashiorkor”, instead of merely following the ‘storytelling path’, makes use of the heightened awareness of journalism. “So this is kwashiorkor!”, Dave, a reporter, realizes when he sees

… a little monkey on the bed. It was a two to three years’ old child. The child did not cry or fidget, but bore an unutterably miserable expression on its face, in its whole bearing. It was as if she was the grandmother writ small; pathetically, wretchedly she looked out upon the world. (Themba 1985: 20)

The opening line immediately catches the reader’s attention:

‘Here’s another interesting case …’

My sister flicked over the pages of the file of one of her case studies, and I wondered what other shipwrecked human being had there been recorded, catalogued, statisticized and analysed. My sister is a social worker … she probes into the derelict lives of the unfortunate poor in Johannesburg. (Themba 1985: 14)

Dave, the narrator, accompanies his sister, Eileen, on her rounds to “ferocious Alexandra Township” (14). She urges him not to get too involved in the horrific circumstances of her case study:

I’m interested in the psychological motivations and the statistical significance, but I think you’ll get you a human-interest story. I know you can’t be objective, but do, I beg you, do take it all quietly and don’t mess up with your sentimental reactions. (Themba 1985: 14)

Eileen supplies him with the cold facts: this is one of the ‘typical’ case studies of a dislocated rural family falling victim to the pitfalls and evils of an urban life to which they are unaccustomed. The father’s struggle to adjust adversely affects his family and, to make matters even worse, he dies in a motor-car accident, leaving his
wife and daughter to fend for themselves. Maria, his daughter, grows up in the streets of Alexandra and at the age of fourteen leaves school to “work in the whiteman’s kitchens” (17). She meets a boyfriend, a “dangerous tsotsi” (17) and falls pregnant. When she confronts him with the news, he assaults her. Her daughter is born without a father, “an event in Alexandra, in Johannesburg, in all urban areas of our times, that excites no surprise whatsoever” (17). At first Maria often visits her daughter, who is brought up by her mother. But then she stops coming, having, once again, given in to the lure of city life. The “little monkey” (20) is Maria’s daughter. She suffers from severe malnutrition, but, worst of all, from extreme apathy:

The child looked aside towards me, and the silent reproach, the quiet, listless, abject despair flowed from the large eyes wave upon wave. Not a peep, not a murmur. The child made no sound of complaint except the struggling breathing. (Themba 1985: 21)

However, in a few weeks Dave forgets about the tragic circumstances, until he happens to meet Maria while covering a court case. She is accused of receiving stolen goods. Dave manages to see her in the holding cells, explaining that he has met her mother and her daughter, and that the child is well. Maria does not seem to care much about the child. She pleads with him to tell her current boyfriend, Lefty, about her problems. When Dave relates the incident to Eileen, she stresses that Maria’s mother should not be told: “… don’t do or say anything to make her panic” (24). However, she finds out anyway and moves back to the “reserve in Pietersburg” (24). Eileen is extremely upset:

“Dave, do you know what this means?” she erupted. “It means that child is doomed. In the country … what they know about the nutrition of children is homicidal … they live on mielie-pap and despair … Kwashiorkor hits hardest between the ages of one and five when protein is needed most and when it’s least available to African children.” (Themba 1985: 24-25)

A while later Dave meets Maria at a party. After struggling to remember who he is, Maria tells him that her child was “bewitched” (26):

“The child’s stomach swelled and swelled with the beast they
planted in it, until the child died. The Lord God will see those people, mmcwii!’”

Viciously, I asked: “And did you send the child Soya beans?” (26)

“Kwashiorkor” relies strongly on the shock technique of vividly sketching the horror of malnutrition and the ultimate helplessness of social workers. The apathetic child reminds a contemporary reader of the plight of the literally millions of AIDS orphans in Africa today, especially when the narrator remarks that before he had “looked into the face of death” (21) kwashiorkor had merely been “another scare-word that had climbed from the dark caves of medical nomenclature” (21). David considers it ‘right’ to liken the illness to “the other horrors like ‘Infant Mortality’, ‘Living Below the Bread-Line’, ‘The Apathy of the People’, and ‘The Cynical indifference of the Affluent Society to the Problem’” (21). Themba’s frustration because black people have been relocated to townships where their living standards are atrocious is obvious:

… the battered house … was just a lot of wood and tin knocked together gawkily to make four rooms. The house stood precariously a few yards from the sour, cider-tasting gutter, and in the back there was a row of out-rooms constructed like a train and let to smaller families or bachelor men and women. (Themba 1985: 15)

The reader is made acutely aware of the permanence of poverty in urban ghetto life, and the restrictions the poor are subjected to. However, Dave’s two coincidental meetings with Maria seem forced, as does some of the information about the illness and the suffering family. Nevertheless, it is a powerful expression of strong feelings of frustration and marginalization.

Also with a journalistic slant, “The Dube Train” relates a violent incident one Monday morning in a third-class compartment on a passenger train. For the narrator, “all is wrong with the world” (Themba 1985: 57). He blames it on the “peculiar chemistry of the body on Monday morning” (57). He tries to fight his boredom by first concentrating on the dilapidated state of the compartment: paneless windows, a
broken door repaired with masonite, so that it was no longer a door, a missing seat, after which he notices the huge, quiet man sitting opposite him. His boredom soon disappears when a girl steps into the compartment, sitting down next to him. When a tsotsi jumps the train and immediately shows interest in the girl by grabbing her breast—“All township love-making is rough” (Themba 1985: 59)—the scene is set for a drama to start unfolding. The girl panics, looking around for help, but everyone minds his or her own business, ignoring her. She starts pleading with the tsotsi. A conversation in tsotsitaal follows:

“O Zigzaga, it’s how here?”
“It’s jewi!hs!”
“Hela, Tholo, my ma hears me, I want that ten¬'n-six!”
“Go to hell!”
“Weh, my sister, don’t listen to that guy. Tell him Shakespeare never said so!” (Themba 1985: 59)

When the girl wants to get off at the next stop, the tsotsi stops her. Only one woman comes to her rescue: “She burst into a spitfire tirade that whiplashed at the men” (60). They wince, but say or do nothing, merely looking around in embarrassment. The tsotsi turns on the woman “and with cold calculation curse[s] her anatomically” (60). The man sitting quietly opposite the narrator suddenly comes to life, taking on the tsotsi, who draws a knife, just as “Croesus Cemetery flashe[s] past” (61), stabbing the man. However, he fights back, hurling the tsotsi towards the narrator, right through the paneless window. At the next station the man “besplattered with blood” gets off, upon which the other passengers “break into a cacophony of chattering” (61).

The conclusion of the short story summarizes the unwillingness of the crowd to get involved with the suffering of their fellow passengers: “Odd, that no one expressed sympathy for the boy or man. They were just greedily relishing the thrilling episode of the morning” (62).

The use of tsotsitaal as township idiom in “The Dube Train” successfully captures the social reality of black urban life in the 1950s. Although the incident on the train is a common example of township violence, the dramatized events are fictional. But journalism and fiction, in Themba’s world, draw on the exact same raw material: an urbanized, detribalized black society in which gangsterism and crime
created a fear and a kind of apathy among its victims instead of an aggression, urging them to actively fight the violence directed at them.

“Ten-To-Ten” is the nickname of a “huge African policeman” on night-beat in the Marabastad township of Pretoria. It refers to the first warning bell at ten-to-ten before the curfew proper for all Africans is enforced. No one ever argues with Ten-To-Ten – he is just too enormous. He was introduced to the police force after being brought to the police station one night when he “went jungle-mad” (48) after a knife had been drawn on him. The officer on duty rightfully realized Marabastad would become a “peaceful location” (49) with him patrolling the streets at night.

Ten-To-Ten is feared by criminals, but loved by all law-abiding citizens, not only because of his antics, but also because of his soccer skills and his sense of humour. He knows his own strength and “seldom exercised it recklessly”. He does not make any unnecessary arrests, rather issuing warnings to those caught on the streets after curfew. Ten-To-Ten cannot be bribed, he does not blackmail shebeen queens caught with illegal liquor to sleep with him in exchange for his silence, he does not misuse his power to beat up people – all common practices among police officers in the 1950s. One night, saving an African from a beating by several Indian men, he is attacked by the African with a knife. Ten-to-Ten goes beserk, breaks the man’s arm, and then quietly tells him “I could have killed you for that … knife” (57). The short story ends with Ten-To-Ten thinking to himself: “This was my bad night, the young, bloody fool!” (57).

“Ten-To-Ten” has a definite urban legend feel to it: the enormous yet gentle ‘good cop’, loved by all, with a ‘legitimate’ weakness of not tolerating being threatened by a knife. This ‘human interest’ story relies on detailed descriptions to keep the reader intrigued. As a personal anecdote it creates a familiar feel with the reader, as if he or she, too, knows Ten-To-Ten. Themba makes use of an “accessible and humanitarian analysis of South Africa’s political system” (Gready, 1990:151) to appeal to his black urban readership.

Mphahlele claimed that Drum had an arbitrary standard of what its readers wanted. He believed the typical Drum short story to be “vulgar escapist stuff” (Mphahlele
1971: 188), hence the seemingly dismissive label “wet sentimental sexy stories” (188) he gave to this form of popular fiction. However, as previously mentioned, he admitted that he never wanted to be a journalist, that he was an educator at heart, that he felt out of place working for Drum. Themba, who was also an educator, however, seemed to have found his niche. In his popular short stories he often emphasized the sentiment to obtain his readers’ sympathies. He seemed to relate to his readers on an emotional rather than an intellectual level. But this was only on the surface. For although he seemed to aspire to Western culture (probably lying about not being able to speak a black language), although his use of wit and irony might have been a defense mechanism to hide his despair, although it might even be true that he had squandered his talent, Themba was inherently serious about his writing. His subject matter was mostly traumatic and he knew, and used, what was available to him – the pulp fiction mode of the “wet sentimental sexy stories” (188) and the sensational exposés. But he ‘intensified’ his storytelling, by making use of language that conveyed a ‘seriousness’, by ‘detaching’ himself from his subject matter in order to heighten awareness, by ultimately driving home the grim reality of the black urban experience. Being able to do this through popular fiction, to reach a popular reader, Themba revealed that he was fully aware of the ‘unreal reality’ of his society, that he was the ultimate witness of a marginalized people. For this reason his short stories still speak to a contemporary twenty-first century reader.

Chapman agrees that “Themba grasped what was available to him – the yellow press opportunities … crammed together with a journalism of heightened awareness, with soccer, sex and sin, his stories succeed in appealing, with a fundamental seriousness, through pulp modes to a vaguely defined, but actual, popular reader” (Chapman, 1989: 23). In his essay “Can Themba, Storyteller and Journalist of the 1950s: The Text in Context” Micahel Chapman claims that:

Themba’s sensational images have communicative power, and in responding to any relationship between the dynamics of society, and human perception, we need to see his stories, in the end, firmly against the race classification laws of the 1950s. (Chapman 1989: 22)

In helping to initiate the search for a black urban voice, Themba, like the other Drum writers, can thus be seen to be involved, inescapably, in difficult procedures of definition and intervention. (23)
Can Themba’s popular fiction appealed to his township readers because it was written in a language they could understand about topics and situations well-known to them. These short stories, although not overtly politically confrontational, dramatize the day-to-day living of the township dweller’s struggle to cope in a restrictive society. Although Themba has been accused of sensationalizing sex, violence and crime in order to pass journalistic facts off as imaginary events, his literary achievement, even in his popular fiction, lies in his ability to both create and reflect the unreal reality of, especially, an urban township like Sophiatown. With almost cinematic reconstruction of the real, as well as the unreal, he creates a kind of escapism from apartheid which is at the same time a resistance to it. Themba undoubtedly fluctuates between fantasy and escapism and harsh, urban reality. Although the boundary sometimes seems to fade, his writing, as illustrated by his so-called popular short stories, is undeniably hard-hitting, honest and persuasive.
CHAPTER FOUR:

SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

In a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it. The real question is: This massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-construction... does it yield only fictions?.. You tell the story of your life by selecting from a reservoir of memories, and in the process of selecting you leave things out. (Coetzee: 1991: 117)

Can Themba was undeniably fascinated by a shebeen culture that defied the laws of his day. As a storyteller, a philosopher, an intellectual, an existentialist, as well as a deeply emotional man, he was a key player in the turbulent 1950s decade of idealism and hope, but also of frustration and despair. As mentioned before, his contemporaries speak highly of his wit and intelligence, although most of them believe that he had squandered his talent, almost deliberately misusing his abilities, mainly because of his excessive drinking, but also because he could not cope with the restrictions of daily life in a racist society.

Although most of Themba’s writing contains certain elements of his troubled life, his later short stories were openly autobiographical, more often than not written in the first person. Bruno van Dyk agrees, claiming that his later pieces:

... foreground the thinly veiled despair in the subtext of his
earlier work. A sombreness of tone and seriousness of matter begin to take precedence over the generative vitality of the earlier work.  

(Van Dyk 1994: 1558)

In “The Will to Die”, Themba creates a protagonist, Foxy, with his own characteristic suicidal, fatalistic approach to life. Foxy, whose “real name” (Themba 1990: 62) is Philip Matauoane, is a teacher, who majored in English (with distinction) at Fort Hare University. The similarities do not stop there. Foxy is unattractive, “a runt of a man” (63), who “wore clothes that swallowed him” (63).

Stan Motjuwadi remembers his first impression of Can Themba, when he was introduced at Madibane High at Western Township by the principal as “a new teacher who had obtained his B.A. with a distinction in English” (Patel, 1990: 4):

He was scrawny with an incongruously puffy, rubbery face. At my most generous I would not say he looked a bit distinguished. Sartorially he was a disaster. No tie, a cheap baggy grey workman’s gabardine trousers, a khaki shirt, shoes that had an overdue date with the repairers and the kind of jacket a fussy student would not be seen dead in.  

(Patel 1990:4)

However, the moment when Themba, like Foxy, opened his mouth, everyone knew that “in that unlikely body resided a live, restless brain” (63). Foxy, like Themba, is a self-aware, urban black, who claims: “I’m the living example of the modern, educated African’s dilemma. I read English and trained to be a teacher – the standard profession for my class in those days” (62). Like Themba, Foxy has an eye for a pretty girl. Sylvester Stein, one of the editors of Drum, who had a great admiration for Can Themba, in Who Killed Mr Drum??? [sic], his informal account of the Drum days, describes Themba as usually being in a “lovelorn condition” (Stein 2000: 99). Foxy falls in love with Betty, one of his pupils, and engages in a sexual relationship with her. This is not frowned upon by “the society of the times” (63). Although her parents turn a blind eye and neither Betty nor Foxy regards the relationship as permanent, his fellow teachers warn him that “this arrangement was too nice to be safe” (63). However, although Foxy agrees, he just cannot stay away from Betty, he cannot be discreet:
“My intelligence tells me that it’ll ruin me, but there’s a magnetic force that draws me to that girl, and another part of me, much stronger than intelligence, just simply exults.” (Themba 1990: 64)

Yet Foxy refuses to marry Betty, explaining that “something in me wants that girl pregnant but not a wife” (64). He defiantly marries another woman, but pays Betty’s parents fifty pounds lobola (bride-price), making her his second wife, so that no fingers can be pointed at him. His first wife, however, when she finds out about the arrangement “battered him … to hell and back” (64). Foxy starts drinking heavily, for, like Themba, whenever he cannot cope, he drinks. And, also like Themba, his drinking starts interfering with his job. Sylvester Stein remembers, “Can was a very difficult man to employ. He wouldn’t turn up, he would have days off” (Nicol, 1991: 178). Foxy, like Themba, also becomes reckless: “Hitherto, he had been meticulous about not cultivating one’s iniquities in the teeth of one’s job, but now he seemed to be splashing in the gutter with a will” (64).

Obed Musi claims that Can Themba wanted to fit in, trying to please everyone. This inclination, like his erratic behaviour, was encouraged by his alcohol abuse:

There was a bit of loneliness one could detect under the hard-drinking Can … There was a rivalry between the guys from Johannesburg and those from Pretoria: the Johannesburg people considered themselves superior and vice versa. Can did not want to identify with Pretoria, he wanted to be one of the slick guys from Johannesburg, and this also made him live in two worlds. (Nicol 1991: 179)

Foxy’s behaviour seems comparable to Themba’s:

Superficially, it hurt him to cause us so much trouble, but something deep down in him did not allow him really to care. He went on drinking hard. His health was beginning to crack under it. Now he met every problem with the gurgling answer of the bottle. (Themba 1990: 65)

Nadine Gordimer believes that even if Themba had been a white American, “he would perhaps have led much the same kind of life” (Nicol 1991: 177). She is
convinced that writing is a “hazardous profession and none of us is [sic] well balanced because otherwise we wouldn’t be writing” (177). But Themba, she says, “didn’t have the self-discipline necessary to write” (177). Many writers, she rightfully points out, “drink themselves to death” (177), but before that they keep on writing. Themba, however, after going into self-exile in Swaziland, stopped altogether.

Foxy, like Themba, is unable to escape his destiny. His wife no longer shares his bed. He has extra-marital affairs, sometimes bedding the women in his own home. Unlike Themba, however, Foxy does not literally drink himself to death: “Liquor should have killed him, but some compulsive urge chose differently” (66). One night, after a particularly bad binge, he mistakes someone else’s house, and wife, for his own, demanding marital rights, and is beaten to death by “four or five men singing hymns in the sitting-room” (a phrase that richly illustrates Themba’s delicious sense of irony). Foxy’s death wish has come true: “Foxy … would have felt: This is as it should be” (66). The last words of the short story, “Some folks live the obsession of death” (66) seem to sum up Can Themba’s own suicidal lifestyle.

Michael Chapman agrees that “The Will to Die” is, to a certain extent, autobiographical:

In “The Will to Die”, Foxy, the schoolteacher-Themba figure, breaks all the rules that sustain the fragile securities of a member of the black middle class, while in real-life Themba, as assistant editor of Drum, had increasingly defied Hopkinson’s expectations of sobriety and responsibility from his journalists, and in February 1959 was sacked for drunkenness. (Chapman 1989:24)

Chapman points out that Themba’s stories in the late 1950s and early 1960s became increasingly documentary in form, as they all seem to have as their subject “the precariousness of the Sophiatown writer-intellectual” (Chapman 1989: 24).

In the opening lines of “The Bottom of the Bottle”, Themba candidly admits that he, like Foxy in “The Will to Die”, suffers from a fatalistic death wish: “Comes a time when a man feels that everything in his personal organization cannot much go on as before” (Themba 1961: 49). However, the very next lines indicate that, although
Themba is aware of what Nadine Gordimer refers to as “the inevitability about Themba’s life” (Nicol 1991: 176), he is unable to make any kind of permanent change:

No dramatic decision may be taken, in some bursting hour of change. But all the same, a man may feel that those in their bits of rag who have for so long been meekly begging at the gate of his mind, can no longer be joked or carefully drunk away.

(Themba 1961: 49)

Gordimer believes that “it is difficult to imagine his life going any other way” (Nicol 1991: 176), as Can Themba “had a hard destiny which he couldn’t escape” (176). Themba evokes the ‘tsotsi-camaraderie’ when he refers to a specific occasion, one of many, “during my bottle blindness” (Themba 1961: 49), when he was drinking with friends:

We were at the House of Truth – my room at 111 Ray Street, Sophiatown, Johannesburg – I and all those frustrated Africans who flitted through the half-legal life of the urban African in the Union.

(Themba 1961: 49)

Stan Motjuwadi remembers Themba’s pad in Sophiatown:

Everybody but the snob was welcome at the House of Truth. You did not have to have permission to bunk with your date on the one single bed in the room. Can would stagger in in the early hours of the morning and pass out in a corner on the floor.

(Patel 1990:7)

According to his contemporaries, Can Themba was a popular man. It seems that more often than not he was surrounded by friends and admirers. And they always drank. In “The Bottom of the Bottle” Themba feels “the luxury of a mild flood of conscience” (49) towards “those young men around me” (49):

Must they bury their lives with mine like this under a load of Sophiatown bottles?

It was conscience that struck me, I say, because I knew many of them looked up to me, my way of life, and repeated my
despair and its defenses behind my back. I knew that they were excited by me when I said: ‘Why should one believe in anything, when one could live – live, gentlemen, at 212 degrees Fahrenheit? The trouble is, gentlemen, for me, human nature stinks; but that is all the material we have to work with.’ They said these things I said. But never with my own deep sense of doubt, the sleepless, tossing suspicion that often made me itch in the very heat of my enthusiasms. 

(Themba 1961: 49-50)

Themba admits that this ‘roguish’ behaviour is frowned upon by the black middle class, by ‘traditional’ rural blacks, as well as by whites:

We were not the calm dignified Africans that the Church so admires (and fights for); not the unspoiled rural African the Government so admires, for they tell no lies, they do not steal, and above all, they do not try to measure up to the white man. Neither were we ‘tsotsis’ in the classical sense of the term, though the ‘tsotsis’ saw us as cousins. 

(Themba 1961: 50)

Bloke Modisane shares Themba’s experience of rejection. In his autobiography, Blame Me on History, he not only admits that “I was alienated by a culture which at the same time imposed upon me an observance of its values” (Modisane 1986: 178), but also stresses that this feeling of alienation is also felt among his fellow blacks:

There is a resentment – almost as deep-rooted as the prejudice itself – against the educated African, not so much because he is allegedly cheeky, but that he fails to conform to the stereotype image of the black man sanctified and cherished with jealous intensity by the white man; such a Native must – as a desperate necessity – be humiliated into submission. The educated African is resented equally by the blacks because he speaks English, which is one of the symbols of white supremacy, he is resentfully called a Situation, something not belonging to either, but tactfully situated between white oppression and black rebellion. The English regard him as a curio, they listen to him with critical attention to detail as regard to accent, usage and syntax; when they have taken a decision they pronounce, with almost divine tolerance and Christian charity, that the African speaks English beautifully; the more naïve listen with unmasked agony whilst the African is struggling with syntax to communicate his thoughts; they suffer patiently between interruptions to request the African to articulate with precision, but these self-same King’s English enthusiasts will listen with enthralment to a continental
The Afrikaners are almost psychotic in their reaction to the English-speaking African, whom they accuse of talking back with insolence and aping the white man; the devices of humiliating into submission the arrogant African are various … (Modisane 1986: 94)

Themba admits that all he and his fellow ‘shebeen intellectuals’ want is acceptance. He relates an incident, which illustrates the improbability of this ever happening. One of his friends, Oubaas, has been working for a while for a white man “of truly untraditional generosity of spirit” (50). While pretending to be “back-slapping buddies” (50) with Oubaas, the white man is, in fact, a racist. When a client buys goods from his chemist, he tells her, “Don’t worry, my boy will carry it out for you. That’s what I hired the native for” (50). Themba claims the way he and his friends cope with this kind of prejudice and betrayal is “[l]iving precariously, cheekily confront…the world’s challenges” (51). Yet, he almost immediately admits that they drink themselves into a stupor every night, because they are not really coping; this does not ultimately help, but that they are unable to stop:

By this time it was becoming clear to me that I was really fighting something inside that nibbled at my soaked soul. Yet, what the hell! We were cavaliers of the evanescent, romantics who turned the revolt inwards upon our bruised spirits. It was flight, now, no more just self-erasure. (Themba 1961: 51)

Bruno van Dyk agrees that

[it]he frustrations that Themba began to experience, caught as he was in the ambivalent position between attraction to and repulsion by ‘European civilization’ – debunking tribalism, yet not finding total acceptance even in liberal white society – had much to do with his increasing reliance on alcohol … (Van Dyk 1994: 1558)

Themba himself repeatedly admits to his alcohol abuse, trying to explain that it is both an act of defiance against racial prejudice, as well as an emotional inability to cope with inhuman treatment. Themba further admits his awareness of a need for a social example. He relates how senior members of the ANC visited ‘The House of
Truth’ to remind him of his duty as an African. They were aware that he was an informal leader among his friends.

“We want your support, man,” said the big one, aghast at this political moron. “We hear that you’ve got some young men about you, and you can make them do things, do things that we don’t think are in the national interest. Will you be with us?” (Themba 1961: 52)

Themba reacts by “jerk[ing] up my thumb automatically” (52) and offering them drinks, which they refuse. When they leave, he imagines one of them muttering, “He’s drunk, that’s all” (52). After this incident, Themba claims, he “heard more and more politics: bitter, heady, virulent stuff” (52). He further claims that Hitherto, the bad boys had been the urban Africans. They were ‘spoiled’, tried to ‘imitate the white man’, were the targets of ‘agitators, Communists and tsotsis’, and above all a sore to the segregationist faith of our masters by their insolent infiltration into the holy preserves of whitedom; the were the black peril, the direct descendants of the treacherous impis under Dingaan, if you can take the contradiction.

But, increasingly now, our all-tolerant country brothers rose up against the authorities, not in lawlessness, but because the Government’s policy of retribalization rode rough-hooves over tribal custom and degraded the true position of the chief.

(Themba 1961: 52-53)

Detribalisation, Themba philosophises, is a result of the “Scramble for Africa” (52) by European countries. The whites lured black labour to urban areas, creating the migrant labour system, causing tribalism to crumble, and subsequently tried to retribalize these black people because they were making increasing social and economic demands. He predicts inevitable conflict, yet admits that he feels helpless:

As I brood over these things, I, with my insouciant attitude to matters of weight, I feel a sickly despair which the most potent bottle of brandy cannot wash away. What can I do?

(Themba 1961: 55)
Michael Chapman agrees that a commonplace view of Themba, which was partly his own doing, is that he was politically inept. Lewis Nkosi, in his Obituary, claims that Themba’s love of irony, his mocking cynicism, his defiance against official persecution, his romanticism and his reliance on alcohol were his trademarks (Nkosi 1985: vii-xi). Sylvester Stein believes that Can Themba was a natural leader and an intellectual giant; that he was courageous (Stein 200: 67). According to Stan Modjuwadi he was more interested in people than in politics (Patel 1990: 5). Anthony Sampson, another editor of Drum, regards Themba as a brilliant writer, who “was always ready to construct an elaborate new theory about women or politics” (Nicol 1991: 177). Jurgen Schadeberg claims:

I do not think Can Themba was a wonderful journalist. I think he was a short story writer and a bit of a philosopher and a dreamer. He identified with people, with movies, with dramas. He quoted speeches from movies. He identified much with Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities. He identified with the book, Knock on Any Door, from which the quote comes ‘live fast, die young and make a good-looking corpse’. So there was a lot of identifying with literature and movies. But he created his own identity from what he read and saw. Because he was rejected by white society, by the part of society that was the ruling part, he found it in other places. (Schadeberg 2002: 112)

Contrary to popular belief, it would seem that although most of Themba’s works do not directly address political activities, his style does address social change. In “Crepuscule”, Themba comments on the Immorality Act by relating his involvement with a white woman. He starts the story by describing his, and hundreds of other black township dwellers’, daily trip to work:

I was in the press that trudged in the crowd on the platform. Slowly, good-humouredly we were forced, like the substance of a toothpaste-tube, through the little corridor and up the escalator that hoisted us through the outlet into the little space of breath and the teeth of pass-demanding South African Police. (Themba 1985: 2)

Although having to put up with the daily humiliation of producing a document to prove that his presence at Park Station is ‘legal’, Themba has “a lilt in [his] step” (Themba 1985: 2), as it is spring and the women who pass him in the street are
wearing thin dresses, “articulating the silhouettes beneath to show me leg and form” (2). According to his contemporaries, Themba was a ladies’ man, hence the many photographs of him (at the Bailey Archives) in the company of women. In South Africa of the 1950s Themba was, of course, not ‘allowed’ to look at white women – “things blackmen are supposed to know nothing of” (3). Themba proceeds to describe how human beings in his society are categorised into racial compartments. Once again, this is an example of how Themba masterfully blurs the divide between storytelling and documentary writing in order to address political issues:

There is a law that says (I’m afraid quite a bit of this will seem like there is a law that says) well, it says I cannot make love to a white woman. It is law. But stronger still there is a custom – a tradition, it is called here – that shudders at the sheerest notion that any whiteman would contemplate, or any blackman dare, a love affair across the colour line. (Themba 1985: 2)

Themba assures the reader that he does not necessarily want to bed white women: “I merely insist on my right to want her” (3). Only then does he reveal that the short story does in fact relate his own relationship with a white woman. The woman in question is Jean Hart. All the members of Drum knew her, as well as her husband Malcolm. They arrived in South Africa from England in 1957 and became involved in the Sophiatown crowd. Stein calls her “the English girl who was everybody’s sweetheart” (Stein 2000: 95). He admits that he, like most of the Drum guys, was also in love with her, and jealous of Can Themba:

For she was not only admirably good-looking, doubly so for being blonde, but witty and wise and a wonderfully talented dancer and singer, able to shake out a sexy kwela and coo an exquisite jazz number in the original Sotho, looking in the process so Anglo-Saxon blonde and yet so African somehow! She had such a way of smiling and whispering at everyone, man woman or child, inviting them into a special secret cuddly relationship with her, that all became sworn to her forever.

(Stein 2000: 106)

Jurgen Schadeberg recalls that Jean Hart shared in the shebeen culture of the fifties. “They were sort of the trendy movement. They were anti-apartheid but not
active to a major degree. Those were the people that ended up in the shebeens”, he remembers (Schadeberg 2002: 112). According to Lewis Nkosi, the only time that he really saw Themba upset was “when the beautiful Englishwoman he was in love with was told by the security police to leave the country. She was going – she had to – but he was staying trapped in the land of apartheid” (Nicol 1991: 180). Nadine Gordimer admits that her novel, Occasion for Loving, is based on this period of Themba’s life:

… the idea, not the characters, was taken from Can’s love affair with a white woman…. Can suffered very badly from the end of that affair and whenever he suffered he always turned to the bottle. He got to the stage where he couldn’t work any more …. It was tragic to see someone of his intellect, wit and charm so wasted.

(Nicol 1991: 180)

Jean Hart remembers Can Themba as a “most tolerant, gentle and humane person” (Nicol 1991: 181), who was deeply affected by “how the reality of being a black and a white in South Africa tortured relationships” (Nicol 1991: 181):

I think it was constantly a great pain for him, but at the same time he had to recognise it and keep reminding me. So we had an affair and we lived together, as far as you can live together under those circumstances, at friends’ houses and so on, but there was always a point at which he would … say … we can’t be real people in this situation.

(Nicol 1991: 181)

Themba mentions nothing of this heartache in “Crepuscule”. He merely describes a series of ironic events, which underline the sociological significance of “the refusal to let us enter so many fields of human experience” (Themba 1985: 8). He starts by relating how he takes ‘Janet’ to his aunt’s home in Victoria Road in Sophiatown. The girl is amazed by what she experiences at the “auntie’s place” (8). The aunt is stunned. Themba slips into his familiar environment with expected ease:

It was a sight to glad [sic] a cynic’s heart to see my aunt shiver before Janet. “Mama” – in my world all women equivalents of my mother are mother to me – “Mama, this is my girl Where is Tata?”

(Themba 1985: 4)
Themba is obviously aware of the stir he is causing, but he underplays it, asking his aunt for a *doek* for Janet, suggesting that the headgear, which was typical of African women, was the symbol of the slave, as it was traditionally used to cover hair that was not the “European idea[s] of beauty” (4), so that she can blend into her environment:

So that evening when I said, ‘Mama, what about a doek for Janet’, I was proposing to transform her, despite her colour and her deep blue eyes, into an African girl for a while. (Themba 1985: 4)

Themba and ‘his girl’ then visit a shebeen. He is welcomed with open arms, as he is obviously a regular visitor. Themba is amused by the fact that he is a sensation because he is accompanied by Janet:

I was well-known in that particular shebeen, could get my liquor ‘on tick’ and could get VIP treatment even without the asset of Janet. With Janet I was a sensation. Shebeens are noisy drinking places and as we approached that shebeen we could hear the blast of loud-mouthed conversation…. But when I entered a haunted hush fell upon the place. (Themba 1985: 4)

The other patrons obviously wonder about Janet’s status. One of them finally has the courage to talk, promising to buy Themba a car if he can get him a girl like Janet. After that, the ice is broken. Collecting a bottle of booze, Themba takes Janet to his room, where he finds some of his friends, and the serious partying starts: “We drank, joked, conversed, sang and horse-played. It was a night of the Sophiatown of my time, before the government destroyed it” (5).

That night, after going to bed with Janet, “chocolate upon cream” (6), Themba claims something strange happened to him in his sleep: “… the Africans say *amadholozi* talked to me – the spirits of my forefathers that are supposed to guide my reckless way through this cruel life …” (5). He wakes Janet, explaining that they have to leave immediately, cynically joking that remembering the half bottle of brandy in her room in Hillbrow, rather than the intervention of the spirits of his ancestors, has woken him, as they drive past a police van, filled with policemen with weapons.
Later, however, he hears that a previous girlfriend had told the police that he was involved with a white girl and that the police were on their way to arrest them:

When we went down Gold Street, it was them we saw in the green lorry-van bent on a date with a kaffir who had the infernal impertinence to reach over the fence at forbidden fruit.

I understand they kicked open the door of my room and stormed in, only to find that the birds had flown. (Themba 1985: 7-8)

Meeting his previous girlfriend a few days later and confronting her about her jealousy, she explains that she reported him because he had humiliated her “with a white bitch” (8).

The storyteller Themba then, within the fictionalised texture of the piece, voices his opinion on the political and sociological significance of being a black person in a restrictive society:

… those of us who have been detribalized and caught in the characterless world of belonging nowhere, have a bitter sense of loss. The culture which we have shed may not be particularly valuable in a content sense, but it was something that the psyche could attach itself to, and its absence is painfully felt in this whiteman’s world where everything significant is forbidden …

It is a crepuscular, shadow-life in which we wander as spectres seeking meaning for ourselves …. The whole atmosphere is charged with the whiteman’s general disapproval, and where he does not have a law for it, he certainly has a grimace that cows you. This is the burden of the whiteman’s crime against my personality that negatives [sic] all the brilliance of intellect and the genuine funds of goodwill so many individuals have …. But leave us some area in time and experience where we may be true to ourselves. It is so exhausting to be in reaction all the time.

These things I claim for my race, I claim for all men. A little respite brother, just a little respite from the huge responsibility of being a nice kaffir. (Themba 1985: 8-9)

Themba returns to storytelling, relating the advice he gets on how to handle the situation. Consequently, the following time he and Janet go to Sophiatown, they park her car at a friend’s mother’s house. However, in the middle of the night his friend wakes him, warning that the police are after them once again. This time the
friend’s mother, who has unmarried daughters, has reported him, as she feels he is wasting his eligibility on a white girl. As it turns out, she needn’t have bothered: the police do not react, believing that she was crying wolf out of jealousy.

Most of the Drum writers – Mphahlele, Maimane, Matshikiza, Nakasa, Motsisi, Nkosi, and of course Can Themba – had at one stage or another lived in Sophiatown during the 1950s. Although their experiences varied, and not all of their writing originated from, or was about, the freehold ‘suburb’, a sense of community, of literary unity, was, nevertheless, created. These authors became known as the ‘Sophiatown set’. Paul Gready believes that Sophiatown in the 1950s “offered unprecedented possibilities for blacks to choose and invent their society from the novel distractions of urban life” (Gready 1990: 139). He claims that, because this was an era of social potential and contradictions, “a collective dream emerged of a black urban culture that might have been” (139). Among these urban blacks, inhabitants of Sophiatown, there was an astonishing diversity of literary knowledge. Themba, one of these “sensitive might-have-beens” (Themba 1961: 50), when Sophiatown was destroyed, lost his literary home. In “Requiem for Sophiatown”, Themba’s obituary of Sophiatown, he elides the distinctions between storytelling and documentary writing. Although relating a specific incident during the destruction of Sophiatown, as well as providing a documentary report on how it affected the inhabitants, he also clearly relates his frustration, his resentment, and his emotional inability to cope with the personal loss. Themba immediately captures the reader’s attention with the irony of the opening lines:

Realism can be star-scattering, even if you have lived your whole unthinking life in reality. Especially in Sophiatown, these days, where it can come with the sudden crash of a flying brick on the back of your head. (Themba 1959: 49)

He describes how he and a friend, the photographer Bob Gosani, “sneaked off towards our secret shebeen in Morris Street” (49). Themba explains that they “were dodging an old friend of [theirs] whom [they] call the Leech, for he is one of those characters who like their drink – any amount – so long as someone else pays for it” (49). Themba describes the shebeen with its small, well-kept garden outside, and its
homely feel inside. He and Gosani are looking forward to having a “half-a-jack of brandy” (49), convinced that the friend, whom they call the Leech, will never find them there. However, when they reach the spot where the shebeen used to be

… it was as if a brick had just struck us simultaneously on our heads. That sweet, little place was just not there. Where it should have been was a grotesque, grinning structure of torn red brick that made it look like the face of a mauled boxer trying to be sporting after his gruel [sic]. A nausea of despair rose up in me, but it was Bob who said the only appropriate thing:

“Shucks.”

(Themba 1959: 49)

Themba admits that the “sheer physical fact of Sophiatown’s removal” (49) intimidates him, although he realizes that the intention of an oppressive Afrikaner government is to strip urban blacks of their freehold rights:

Inside of me, I have long stopped arguing the injustice, the vindictiveness, the strong-arm authority of which prostrate Sophiatown is a loud symbol. Long ago I decided to concede, to surrender to the argument that Sophiatown was a slum, after all. I am itchingly nagged by the thought that slum-clearance should have nothing to do with the theft of freehold rights. But the sheer physical fact of Sophiatown’s removal has intimidated me. (Themba 1959: 50)

Modisane agrees that Sophiatown was demolished “in the name of slum clearance” (Modisane, 1986: 5) only:

Sophiatown was destroyed in a determination to bring it and the other areas where Africans still held freehold rights under the influence of the Government’s general policy that no African is entitled to acquire freehold title to land anywhere in South Africa, nor is it the intention of the present Nationalist Government ever to grant such right to the African, even in his own reserves; this is contained in the Natives (Urban Areas Consolidation) Act No. 25 of 1945. For our freehold title we were offered leasehold tenure. As more pressure was applied, the more unbearable it became, until the people of Sophiatown surrendered up their resistance and grudgingly sold their properties to the Resettlement Board at assessed by devaluators of the board; and as they were moved their homes fell before the bulldozers. (Modisane 1986: 116)
His grief at losing the place he used to call home rates as intense as that of Themba:

The people I had known, and loved, were gone; the relative, the friend, the childhood sweetheart, last year’s beauty queen, the nice-time girls, the shebeen queens, the beggars, the thieves, the frauds, the gangsters, the killers; they were all gone, and with them had gone the only world I knew. The music had gone, the colour, the violence, only the desolation remained.

(Modisane 1986: 9)

Themba above all laments the loss of community. He nostalgically remembers Fatty of the Thirty-nine Steps shebeen, their friend the dwarf, who used to be able to find a joke about everything and was amused by the fact that Bloke Modisane was a Mozart lover, Mabeni’s, the shebeen where Dolly Rathebe once sang:

These are only highlights from the swarming, cacophonous, strutting, brawling, vibrating life of the Sophiatown that was.

(Themba 1959: 50)

He stresses that Sophiatown did not have only a dark side of violence, indulgence and gangsterism, but also a definite sense of fun, and of community spirit:

But it was not only all just shebeeny, smutty, illegal stuff. Some places it was the stuff that dreams are made on.

(Themba 1959: 50)

He remembers, for instance, how the St Cyprian’s schoolboys dug a swimming pool, how Father Huddleston organised bursaries for deserving pupils, how people worked hard and saved money to pay off the mortgage, in order be proud home-owners. Themba relates how he still meets the children of early Sophiatonians in respectable homes:

Mostly we talk of our lot in life. After all, too often we have been told that we are the future leaders of our people. We are the young stalwarts who are supposed to solve the problems of our harassed world.

(Themba 1959: 51)
He relates how they discuss politics, e.g. what has happened in the rest of Africa, tactical difficulties within the ANC, “this African Personality idea” (52), the opposing ideologies of the East and West, the power of Christian ideas and the ideals of democracy, the breaking away from old tribal belief in witchcraft. He remembers how they speculate about what will happen if blacks take up violence, whether black men really want affairs with white women, what will happen if a prominent Afrikaner nationalist gets caught by the Immorality Act. Themba believes that these kinds of discussions are made possible by the cosmopolitan feel of Sophiatown:

Somewhere here, and among a thousand more individualistic things, is the magic of Sophiatown. It is different and itself. You don’t just find your place here, you make it and you find yourself. There’s a tang about it. You might now and then have to give way to others making their ways of life by methods not in the book. But you can’t be bored. You have the right to listen to the latest jazz records at Ah Sing’s over the road. You can walk a Coloured girl of an evening down to the Odin Cinema, and no questions asked. You can try out Rhugubar’s curry with your bare fingers without embarrassment. All this with no sense of heresy. Indeed, I’ve shown quite a few white people ‘the little Paris of the Transvaal’ – but only a few were Afrikaners.

What people have thought to be the brazenness of Sophiatown has really been its clean-faced frankness. (Themba 1959: 53)

With Can Themba, black writing by black writers about black issues enters a new era of self-awareness. Themba claimed to be apolitical, and was known by his colleagues to shy away from any form of organized politics. However, in most of his work the reader clearly senses the frustration of his daily life, in which he was subjected to the Afrikaner-dominated, Nationalist South Africa of the 1950s. Themba, as a member of the ‘Sophiatown set’, records the voices of urban blacks struggling to assert themselves. According to Ulf Hannerz:

There is indeed a polyphony of voices here to keep at least the mythical community alive, even if naturally the great majority of ordinary Sophiatowners left no comparable documents. (Hannerz 1994: 181)
Hannerz believes that because different cultures make up a “global mosaic” (182), the world has become an “open landscape” (182), making meanings and forms “less place-bound” (183) than in the past. He claims that Sophiatown, having brought different cultures (mostly American jazz, movies, fashion) in from the outside, also “exports something of its own to the surrounding worlds: regionally, nationally, globally” (184). This is what keeps the myth that is Sophiatown alive. Hannerz agrees that Can Themba’s autobiographical writings are more analytical and interpretive than his monthly journalism in Drum (188). He believes that because of Sophiatown’s “connections with the outside world, and particularly with metropolitan ways of life” (190), the reader is captured by its magic. Sophiatowners, he claims, “imported means for making their statements, to other South Africans and to themselves, about who they wanted to be” (192). Themba, through his writing, creates a kind of permanence and an identity within an uncertain society.

Although the ‘Sophiatown set’ lived, and especially wrote, in a vacuum, although their sense of isolation was intensified by a carpe diem attitude, and although they considered themselves to be trapped in their own present, without a defined literary tradition, this paradoxically opened up new horizons. They broke with their tribalized past – finally and irrevocably – refusing to admit that their ‘traditions’ were being adapted into their new, urbanized context. Admittedly, these black intellectuals led a kind of ‘shadow life’ in the social circles of white liberals, aspiring to be accepted into Western society (hence Themba’s showing off with ‘Janet’), but through the very ambiguity of their magical Sophiatown world, through its ‘unreal reality’, because it was so absolutely constructed, so unique, they managed to transcend the harsh restrictions of apartheid in their writing.

However, on a day to day basis there was always the frustration, the contradiction of aspiring to be part of an interracial society, yet also being stereotyped as a ‘situation’. Themba admits that he, too, is frustrated, but hopeful:

And still I wander among the ruins trying to find one or two of the shebeens that Dr. Verwoerd has overlooked. But I do not like the dead-eyes with which some of these ghost houses stare back at me. One of these days I, too, will get me out of here.

(Themba 1985: 108)
But although Can Themba has been typified as the alienated ‘situation’ during the 1950s, although he has been romanticized as the almost mythical ‘shebeen intellectual’, the ultimate ‘intellectual tsotsi’, the rebel of Sophiatown, his search for identity in a restrictive socio-political system is not confined to his time or to his environment. His literary significance is as important today as it was fifty years ago. For although he wrote about the end of the decade of shebeen culture, and although he was a significant part of the socializing process of the 1950s, Themba’s sense of place was not merely a geographical condition. “The government has razed Sophiatown to the ground, rebuilt it, and resettled it with whites. And with appropriate cheek, they called it Triomf” (Themba 1985: 6), yet, the symbolic meaning of Sophiatown in literature, as well as in politics, can never be destroyed:

… The mythical community is still there, claiming its place, it would seem, in the useful past of the South African future; and in the view from afar, Sophiatown belongs not only to South Africa but also to the world. (Hannerz 1994: 193)

Ultimately, although Themba tried to bury this clarity of vision under “a load of Sophiatown bottles” (Themba 1961: 50), feeling that he could not be a real person in an unreal society, although he did probably misuse his talent for writing, not at least leaving the legacy of an autobiography, Can Themba’s self-declared insouciant attitude seems far removed from the truth. Can Themba might, as Nkosi claims, not have fully developed his talent. He does, however, successfully capture, through his superb eloquence, the mood of township life, the Sophiatown of his time, before it was destroyed by a white government. His use of the township idiom in his writing brings to life the shebeen queens, the tsotsis, the nice-time girls, i.e. the heroes of Sophiatown. In “Crepuscule” he sketches with sharp irony “a crepuscular, shadow-life in which we wander as spectres seeking meaning for ourselves … The whole atmosphere is charged with the whiteman’s general disapproval” (Themba 1985: 8).

Themba’s literary style is tough, yet vital. It reflects the urban sub-culture of Sophiatown in such a way that the township is no longer merely geographically situated, but becomes a culture, a being. As illustrated before, Themba captures
African speech and the rhythm of a *tsotsitaal*, an everyday vivid street language. He uses sharp wit (that reminds the reader of his favourite writer, Oscar Wilde) to create a kind of ‘transitional language’ of hybrid English. His knowledge of English literature was diverse, and it definitely influenced his writing. Yet he manages to capture an ‘African style’ which vividly articulates township culture in a way ‘pure’ English could never do. When Themba and his *Drum* colleagues went into exile and were silenced by the Nationalist government, this ‘renaissance’ in South African literature seemed extinguished. Yet it only went into ‘remission’. The symbolic meaning of Sophiatown in literature and politics alike is that not only of resistance, but also of re-emergence. Sophiatown was demolished and renamed, but today it has reclaimed its name. Can Themba, unfortunately, never witnessed the co-existence he had always dreamed would happen, but together with the mythical community that is Sophiatown he has claimed and reclaimed his rightful place in South African literature.
CHAPTER FIVE:

CAN THEMBA: “POLITICAL VIRGIN” OR SELF-AWARE PIONEER?

In the world today are poised against each other two massive ideologies: of the East and of the West. Both of them play international politics as if we’re bound to choose between them. Between them only. We have just discovered that we can choose as we like, if we grow strong in our own character.

(Themba 1959: 52)

The 1950s in South Africa were, in the words of Es’kia Mphahlele, a time of “political ferment” (Mphahlele 2002: 308). White racism with its violence and draconian laws, like the prohibition of mixed marriages and interracial mixing, enforced separate residential areas and forced removal, so-called Bantu education and the suppression of communism, created an overwhelmingly oppressive social formation. However, it has been argued that Can Themba, instead of protesting against the inhuman apartheid legislation, the absurd social situation, concentrated on lively, investigative journalism. Drum provided the social barometer of the decade. And Can Themba, as one of its journalists, did report on politics (and sports and fashion and films and trends) in a spectacular, imaginative way, rather than deliberately protesting against the apartheid laws. However, his pacy style and spectacular representation may in fact reflect a heightened awareness, which, although not overtly political, can certainly be interpreted as a conscious way of addressing the political issues of the time.
There is no argument that the Drum journalists of the 1950s were writers first and foremost. Most of them, with the exception of Modisane and Mphahlele, claimed to be apolitical. Stan Motjuwadi in his obituary describes Themba “as political as his ever-torn sock … a political virgin” (Motjuwadi 1968: 2). Motjuwadi recalls:

Although the Writers Association of South Africa honoured him with the Henry Nxumalo Award for his contribution to journalism, Can was never a leg man. For him, slogging it out in search of news bordered on the mundane … He fell four-square on the definition of a poet as somebody who can give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name. Yes, Can could write about nothing and anything and make it pleasant reading. (Essop 1985: 6-7)

As discussed in a previous chapter, Drum was never intended as a political paper or even a newspaper. It was an entertainment periodical, concentrating on fiction, exposés, crime investigations and sporting features. However, paradoxically, although the kind of politically relevant journalism used by the Drum writers was by no means revolutionary or radical, it did in fact address political consciousness among urban blacks. Therefore, it doubled as a political paper in spite of its predominantly commercial slant.

By his own admission, Themba had an “insouciant attitude to matters of weight” (Themba 1961: 55), as is illustrated in his short story “The Bottom of the Bottle”:

But our old-world tribal state was not to be left virgo intacta. The fifteenth century hurled at us the economic and adventurous restlessness of Europe, and subsequently the mania called the “Scramble for Africa” shuddered the sub-continent. The sheer physical impact of the assault was enough to stagger the edifice of tribalism. I can almost see my infinitely great-grandfather leaping to his feet on a rock and gaping at a sailing ship seeking harbour – all his patriarchal dignity forgotten, as he exclaims, “Hau!” (Themba, 1961: 53)

In “Khama Dispute”, published in Drum in October 1956, Themba seems detached in his narrative. He relates how the heir of Bechuanaland, Seretse Khama, became an
exile, speculating which forces kept Khama from taking his place as leader of his country. He describes how his controversial marriage to a white British woman, Ruth Williams, contributed to his dilemma of whether he stood a chance of reclaiming his rightful position as leader of his people. There is very little sign of Themba’s characteristic personal involvement in his subject. This may be because the facts are not part of his immediate social and political background.

However, ever-present in the lives of Themba and his contemporaries in the 1950s was an oppressive Afrikaner government attempting to silence their black South African urban audience by imposing impossible laws, ultimately aiming to create a fragmented society, and calling it ‘separate development’. Worst hit was education. No longer were blacks entitled to missionary education, but the so-called ‘Bantu Education’ was forced onto them by Verwoerd and his cabinet, introducing a “curriculum and syllabus in order to lower the quality of education for us” (Mphahlele 2002: 87). Most of the Drum writers, including Themba, however, had been exposed to a formative education, which included studying Shakespeare, the Romantics, and realism. Nadine Gordimer believes that they were much more widely read than black authors today (Gready 1990: 143).

Themba’s reality was township life which was at the same time vibrant and optimistic, as well as suffocating, dangerous and frightening. The 1950s urban black, having rejected his or her tribal background, had to turn somewhere, so he or she adopted American tastes: jazz, beauty queens, gangsters, sports and booze. However, although many of the Drum journalists were influenced by black American fiction, this was essentially a generation familiar with the nineteenth century European tradition of realism, exemplified by writers such as Charles Dickens. These young writer-journalists recreated their world with its miseries and its joys. They wrote about what was familiar to them. Although their aim was to enthral their audience, they did report on the everyday reality of crime, fear, alcohol abuse, oppression, lack of education and recreational facilities – in other words social and political issues.

The standard of Drum’s social and political reportage is high. It is also unique for its time, as the journalists do not use a revolutionary tone, but rather concentrate on colloquial storytelling, and descriptive narrative. Bruno van Dyk argues:

Many of Themba’s journalistic pieces highlight aspects of township life, often using a technique akin to what has become known as the ‘new non-fiction’… dialogue, altering points of
view, characterization and atmosphere obscure the lines between fiction and non-fictional report. (Van Dyk 1994: 1558)

What Van Dyk calls the ‘new non-fiction’ was started in the early 1960s in America as “journalism that would … read like a novel” (Wolfe 1973: 21-22). Wolfe describes the first time he read a feature article in a magazine that “opened with the tone and mood of a short story” (Wolfe 1973: 23). He was so surprised at the tone and mood of the article that he remarked “What inna namea christ is this [sic]” (23). He further relates how Jimmy Breslin (the writer in question) “made a revolutionary discovery. He made the discovery that it was feasible for a columnist to actually leave the building, go outside and do reporting on his own, genuine legwork” (25). “As obvious as this sounds, it was unheard of among newspaper columnists, whether local or national” (25).

Yet, in the 1950s, in Johannesburg, the Drum reporters were already doing the exact same thing. It would seem that these reporters, especially Themba, had quite accidentally, like Jimmy Bresner years later, stumbled on a ‘revolutionary’ method of journalistic reportage which was as gripping as their short stories, and often even more so. This form of non-fiction did not involve ‘hard news’. Instead, ‘human interest’ stories were told in a compelling way (the so-called ‘features’). Themba, it seems, was a pioneer, not a ‘political virgin’. In his dramatic accounts Themba the writer and Themba the journalist blur the lines between facts and information and storytelling. This writer-journalist creates a hybrid style, linking imaginative perception and social reportage. This style is easily compared to the New Journalism in America:

Breslin’s work stirred up a certain vague resentment among both journalists and literati during the first year or two of his column – vague because they never fully understood what he was doing … only that in some vile Low Rent way the man’s output was literary. Among literary intellectuals you would hear Breslin referred to as ‘a cop who writes’ or ‘Runyon on welfare’. These weren’t even intelligent insults, however, because they dealt with Breslin’s attitude, which seemed to be that of the cab driver with his cap tilted over one eye. A crucial part of Breslin’s work they didn’t seem to be conscious of at all: namely, the reporting he did. Breslin made it practice to arrive on the scene long before the main event in order to gather the off-camera material, the by-play in the make-up room, that would enable him to create character. It was part of his modus operandi to gather ‘novelistic’
details, the rings, the perspiration, the jabs on the shoulder, and he did it more skillfully [sic] than most novelists. (Wolfe 1973: 27-28)

Can Themba’s “Let the People Drink!”, published in Drum in March 1956, makes extensive use of the conventions of fictional approach. He involves his readers by giving an accurate account of their common experience: visiting shebeens, mostly to escape the harsh reality of their daily lives. The 1950s prohibition against buying or selling ‘white man’s liquor’ was not really prohibition at all, because a strong shebeen subculture was created, to which the government, and the police, turned a blind eye. ‘Liquor-running’ (bootlegging) was big business, as it provided shebeen owners, who were mostly women, the so-called shebeen queens, as well as poor whites, but especially gangsters, with an income. Although the shebeens were not run openly, everyone, including the police, knew where the most popular ones were. They even had names. The common practice was to ‘check out’ the potential client before opening the shebeen door and selling liquor. Themba starts his opinion piece with a dramatic description of the secrecy involved in visiting one of the top, ‘classy’ shebeens, “Little Heaven”, creating a sense of excitement and suspense:

There was a door like a shed-door. I knocked on the door, and called: “Ousie! Ousie!” A latch screeched back, and a broad face peered at me. Then the door opened, and I stepped into a shabby passage.

I was led to a second door beyond which a drone of voices flowed. I walked into a very well furnished, brightly lit room. Modern jazz music of the hottest kind blared at me. And the room was crowded by African men and women sitting in clusters of threes and fours, enjoying – most of them – beer.

(Themba 1956: 53)

The hostess welcomes Can Themba, introducing him as Mr Drum. He sits down on one of the couches and observes the people around him. Themba describes them as respectable, upstanding citizens of the community – a staff nurse, two teachers, two policemen, a constable and a sergeant. Without inciting his readers, without telling them in a revolutionary tone that all these decent people want and deserve is a quiet drink after work where the “atmosphere is friendly and sociable” (54), Themba creates an intense feeling of frustration.
When he proceeds to describe the more ‘slummy’ shebeens, as opposed to the so-called ‘classy’ ones, he concentrates on the element of danger that people, who are able to pay less, are subjected to, as they generally get “more violent concoctions” (54) – liquor spiked with all kinds of dangerous additives. He then provides a price list of what liquor costs at the shebeens, and proceeds to tell his readers how he tries to find out “where all this liquor comes from” (54). A dramatic description follows of how he accompanies a few men on one of their liquor buying trips in the back of a van to the house of their supplier, a white man. At the end of the trip someone remarks, “Ou Verwoerd notch skaars” (Verwoerd doesn’t know a thing) (55). By using a colloquial remark, Themba addresses the everyday political issue of an oppressive white government, which seems unaware of bootlegging, but is more likely turning a blind eye. He continues by giving details of the hierarchy of suppliers to shebeens, i.e. well-researched information. By then he has thoroughly captured his audience’s attention. If he had started with the ‘boring’ information, many of them might not have read on. However, he can be almost certain that every single one of his readers agrees with his opinion:

The issue is no more whether Africans in general should be allowed to drink. THEY DRINK IN ANY CASE. The issue is whether they may drink legally.

Prohibition has been proved impossible. There is too great a thirst for drink among the unentitled. (Themba 1956: 57)

In conclusion, having argued that legalising liquor to blacks would cut down on crime, Themba, with witty irony, convinces his readers that he is ‘one of them’:

The police were very friendly. They told me that a man of my standing ought to apply for a liquor license, and not to be found drinking in shebeens.

I paid £5 like thousands of other men of my standing, caught in the same circumstances. (Themba 1956: 57)

Themba’s approach to reflecting the facts is fictionalized. He shares his intimate knowledge of the liquor trade with his reader in a dramatic way, illustrating
the fascination and excitement of shebeen life. Juby Mayet agrees that visiting shebeens did involve an element of exciting danger:

… it was great fun going to shebeens and hearing on the grapevine that the gatters [police] were on the way, and everyone would dive through the doorways and windows and leave glasses and things. There was an element of fun and excitement about it. (Nicol 1991: 95)

To Anthony Sampson shebeen life represents an unreal reality:

… I remember watching a man hide under a table when word came that his wife was looking for him while his mistress was bundled out of the window. That was like watching an Elizabethan play. (Nicol 1991: 95)

Chapman agrees that “Themba the journalist and Themba the imaginative writer become completely intertwined” (Chapman 2001: 209). Dramatizing his material may make it seem less actual, less socially responsible, less politically confrontational; whereas in fact, by making use of imaginative writing, he accentuates the drama and the restrictions of black urban ghetto life. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the use of fictional devices may have made Themba’s reportage pieces more ‘real’ to the reader. Wolfe claims that the voice of the narrator was one of the biggest problems in ‘New Journalism’, as the narrator was understood to be detached, calm and cultivated (Wolfe 1973: 31). Themba, however, although reporting objectively, is completely involved in his article, using fictional devices such as dialogue and colloquialisms.

Still on the topic of booze, in “Boozers, Beware of Barberton”, published in Drum in May 1957, Themba, again in a dramatic storytelling way, warns his readers against drinking home-made liquor (Barberton), which is poisonous and therefore dangerous to their health. The shebeen brew is sold at a certain address, which reminds Themba of the urban legend of a coloured woman who used to sell her home made brew at number 17, Marshall Street, Ferreirastown, which is “just about the craziest address
I’ve met” (22) (because of the ‘black magic’ goings-on). In order to stop her neighbours taking away her profitable trade, she ‘jinxes’ her room. This causes two brothers, Chris and Willem Thyssen, to start acting in a crazy way. One of the two even dies. Themba relates that other tenants of the room in Marshall Street also ‘went mad’ and that the “Doom Room” (22) was about to strike again: this time two brothers have an enormous fight. He concludes by linking the strange madness of the inhabitants to the poisonous brew each one of them drank. Themba claims that this might be “the answer to the mystery of the yard of the lunatics” (22), thus warning readers to be careful of home brew. Once again, detailed, straightforward descriptions of the victims of the home brew would have revealed the same information. However, apart from not catching and keeping his readers’ attention, Themba might have seemed condescending. Instead, he entertains – and conveys exactly the same socially responsible message.

“Russian Famo Shesh!”, published in Drum in March 1958, is another example of ‘new non-fiction’. It describes an orgy witnessed by Themba. The title is based on the ‘Famo’, a “famous sex dance of the Russians, Basotho gangsters of the Reef” (49). Themba tells of the “stunning scene, so cramped with swarming life and sweating bodies” (49), in which the women are, seemingly, the aggressors:

The men just swayed. The women were the stars. They danced a primitive thing that looked strangely like jive. Now and again, at little climaxes in the song and the dance, the women kicked up their legs to show panties, and with some of them, no panties. The men ogled and goggled.

But in their ogling and goggling they were secretly choosing the women who seemed to promise them most. (Themba 1958: 49)

There is, of course, the inevitable liquor consumption, “mostly K.B.” (49) – slang for so-called ‘kaffir beer’ – associated with shebeen-like township entertainment, as well as simulated fights with sticks, which are in fact sexual games. Themba tells how his hostess, a “short Mosotho woman, nicely stacked, beaming hospitality” (49), approaches him with a “gourd of beer” (49), from which he takes a “big, long swig” (49), to “show [his] manliness” (49). He also relates how he is
approached by one of the dancing women, “darting back and forth like a cobra preparing to attack” (49), who first throws her dress right over her head, revealing what she has on offer – “knees, thighs, black panties, belly and a navel” (51), and then throws one of her legs “clean over my head” (51). Themba’s answer to these advances is to buy more liquor. Towards the end of the evening he notices the crowd “thinning” (51). He goes outside to try to determine why, but immediately rushes back into the hall (displaying some kind of false modesty?), for “[i]n the open couples [are] making love” (51). Once again, Themba describes an aspect of township life in the 1950s. His descriptions of the atmosphere during the orgy successfully transgress the line between journalistic reporting and imaginative, dramatised fiction. Themba allows the description of the “Famo”, as well as his reaction to what he observes, to speak for itself, offering no criticism or opinion.


In “God’s Chillun Gotta Work” the colloquial title of this investigative report about child labour among, mostly Indian, children on the Natal sugar cane fields suggests the influence of African-American slang on the urban black on the reef. It already sets the mood of the inevitability of these children’s circumstances. Their parents are as uneducated as they are, and as trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and hardship. Can Themba starts his piece by telling the story of a typical day in the life of Ganas Kistensamy, one of these children who claims to be eleven years old, but looks closer to ten. From Monday to Saturday, Ganas gets up at the crack of dawn to start his eight-hour working day at seven, after having had only coffee and dry bread for breakfast. He wears tattered clothes and takes his meagre lunch with him. Ganas has
no choice – his parents are poor and need his wages to feed his family and send their
other children to school:

“I would rather let one child work in the fields and not go to
school than let all my children be left without any education,”
is the typical outlook of many of these workers. (Themba 1957: 55)

There is no sentimentality in Themba’s journalism, no melodrama. His
account of the children’s plight is realistic, yet sympathetic:

The working children boast to their friends that one of their brothers
is a teacher and the other will also be a teacher. But they know that
for the rest of their lives they would have to struggle to make a living.
They have no education and will probably never have education.

She sat on the doorway with tears in her eyes when I asked her
whether the work she was doing was hard. She sat without
answering my questions with that sad and helpless look in her eyes.
(Themba 1957: 55, 57)

Themba’s style may be slightly theatrical, but what he essentially conveys, is
angry protest. He does not write with detachment, although his personal feelings do
not spill over into his report. Themba does not attack a society which allows its
children to do manual labour, but, almost by what he does not say, condemns its lack
of compassion:

There is no age limit for children who seek work in the fields.
There is no legislation regulating their conditions of work, rates
of pay, etc. If a child wants work, it sees the sirdar on the field
and applies for work …. No record is kept of the child’s age ….  
No force or compulsion is used on any child to work in the fields.
The children are at liberty to work when they want to and are paid
according to the number of days worked.       (Themba 1957: 57)

“Love by Martial Law” refers to a “slogan of intimidation” (Themba 1957: 20).
Prevalent on the streets of Johannesburg among urban blacks is the practice of
members of major gangs “forcing their attentions on women” (20), by either
“twist[ing] their arms” (20) or threatening them at knife or gun point, “until the women give in to the advances of their persecutors” (20). The journalistic piece is accompanied by photographs, which are dramatised examples of incidents of this kind, with captions, illustrating that

… calf love has become rough love. For the bright boys have thrown overboard all the art and all the finesse in love-making, and have resorted to force. Love by force, or love by “martial law” … has become the latest pastime. (Themba 1957: 20)

Themba believes that the social condition is a result of “too many of our womenfolk accept[ing] ‘martial law love’ as “the normal thing” (20):

… the old, primitive hero-worship of the rough and rugged brute … many women still don’t want to be charmed; they want to be clubbed. (Themba 1957: 22)

He mentions well-known women who have been subjected to this kind of behaviour, e.g. the stage personalities Thoko Thomo and Ursula Bergman, the singer Miriam Makeba, the beauty queen Edith Nkosi, and the Drum pin-up girl, Susan Gabashane. These women, Themba claims, are “at the high-powered level of people who come before the notice of big-time thugs” (22), but, he states, worst of all is that it “happens on a lower level every day in the streets of our townships” (22). The men are too scared to protect the women, even schoolgirls and youngsters are not safe any longer. This, Themba stresses, is a direct result of life in a society

… where crime is the only powerful item of culture, where recreational facilities are devised from the street, where parental and community control are non-existent, where boys grow into young men and young men into grown men without much visible hope in the future for self and for race … (Themba 1957: 23)

He ends his opinion piece with a warning:

Without the opportunity and the encouragement to live better, we find it hard to retain the will to live better. And sometimes we feel
so screamingly frustrated that we want to throw ourselves against everything! (Themba 1957: 23)

Themba clearly regards the brutal behaviour of the men, as well as the acceptance of this form of behaviour by the women, as the consequence of living in a society in which they are denied any hope for a better future. Theirs is a reality far removed from the expectations created by so-called romantic fiction. Themba, through sensitive journalistic reportage, reminds his readers of an urban experience that is cruel, violent, unfair, but, above all, real: one from which there seems to be no possibility of escape under the present circumstances.

“Zeerust: the Women’s Battle” also tells a story of women as victims of a society unable to protect them, this time in a rural environment. Their struggle is the result of an ongoing battle between the government and tribesmen. Themba sketches the background event: When the government tried to issue passes for women of the Zeerust district, they got rid of the chiefs who opposed this, “recognis[ing]” (Themba 1958: 21) more co-operative chiefs. However, the “supporters of the deposed chiefs and resisters to passes for the women” (21) caused the breakdown of the “whole tribal structure” (21), resulting in fights between the police, aided by government-appointed ‘chiefs’ and tribal guardsmen. As a result “houses were burned down” (21, 23), cattle and land neglected, and women refused to take passes. The government suddenly issued an edict, preventing people from entering or leaving the district. Ultimately, “huge hordes, members of the Bafurutse tribe” (23) sought refuge – “modern Voortrekkers, black, bitter, beaten” (23).

Themba provides extracts from interviews with the women, who prefer not to be identified, in case they ever return to Zeerust:

“We women never clashed with the Government or the police before these papers. Now the police and the chief’s police come at any time of the day or night, kick open our doors and demand our passes.”

“I have had to hide in the fields and the hills many times like an animal. We decided to flee from the Union rather than have passes.”
“What war is this that fights women? What law is this when our chief, who is not our chief, and his beat-up men, have no more respect for the huts of their fellow-men, beat up their women?” (Themba 1958: 25-27)

He explains how he tries to reason with these tribal blacks, without success. These people have not yet been ‘corrupted’ by an urban system. They live in “crude huts” (25, 27) and rely on their chief to find them pieces of land. They still follow the lobola system. The refugees, who are “scattered all over Bechuanaland” (27) cannot be placed or grouped homogeneously, and they refuse to give in and return to their homes. Themba concludes:

Maybe the bitterness will burn out of the hearts of the refugees …

But they will find it hard ever to look back at the Union kindly and without sadness if one is to judge by what they are saying.

(Themba 1958: 27)

In other words, once again, there is no solution in a country in which the majority of the people is oppressed by a minority group.

“Why Our Living’s So Tough” addresses the problem of urban blacks surviving on their monthly salary. Themba’s opening statement, in his usual dramatic fashion, immediately gets the attention of his readers:

THERE’S a sticky problem that all of us have to settle now and again. It’s stated in the groan of the workman who looked ruefully at his pay-packet and said: “Pay-day is the worst day, for then you have to pay for accounts greater than the pay.” Other people with fancy ways of putting things call it, “The Problem of the Cost of Living.”

(Themba 1958: 19)

He then supplies statistics of how much a family needs “for an adequate and decent living” (19) and explains why, for most urban blacks, “living’s so tough”:

You need £31 a month to live “adequately and decently.” You get only £15 a month to do the job. So you don’t live adequately and decently. There are some who get more. There are also the few who get less, who go downer and downer as life goes on. (Themba 1958: 19)
Using the examples of three actual families from “the High, the Middle, and the Low” (20) groups of income, Themba illustrates their quality of living. He also makes use of photographs to visually emphasize their (mostly dire) circumstances. The first group is happy, well adjusted, eats meat and vegetables every day, the second group struggles, does not have meat every day, but manages to make ends meet somehow, whereas the third group goes hungry, has few worldly possessions and even fewer prospects. Once again, he fails to see an immediate solution:

Trapped, cornered, dazed by the screaming demands of your budget, you gape and groan. There must be a better way for humans to live than this. (Themba 1958: 19)

Although “Our Hungry Children” also addresses the problem of poverty, Themba focuses on the social conscience of the fellow South Africans, when he tells them about children whose parents had to choose between feeding them and sending them to school, and chose the latter. This journalistic piece is yet another example of ‘new non-fiction’. It starts by quoting an article in another paper, reporting on the plight of these children who face going to school hungry every day. An “African Children’s Feeding Scheme” (57) is unable to provide for the nutritional needs of the children, due to insufficient funds. Themba relates how he visits a school, asking children what, and indeed if, they have eaten that morning. Most of them have had little or no food. He recalls a scene (from Oliver Twist) of “an English workhouse boy asking for more” (61).

Themba concludes his piece by concentrating on the case of “seven-year-old Patience Bothile” (61), telling his readers about her morning routine in the dead of winter, going to school only having had a cup of tea:

I knew what just a cup of hot broth, a slice of bread with peanut butter spread, could do for this child. I’m told it would cost just a tickey. Somebody’s got to find that blasted tickey! (Themba 1958: 61)
Reporting on political deportation in “Banned to the Bush”, in Drum in August 1956, Can Themba turns a shocking tale of political injustice – depriving people of their freedom and human rights – into a drama, a ‘human interest’ story. His investigative journalism is almost ‘disguised’ by the addition of a personal touch: he makes it the story of Alcott Gwentshe. He kicks off by giving the government’s viewpoint on the “concentration camp” (22) for political offenders: because these people are not ‘prisoners’ they are not, as a rule, confined to the ‘camps’:

There has been legal argument about whether they are allowed to leave the camp at all and go into town “on parole”. It is true there are no barbed-wire fences, no armed sentries, no forced labour – and Dr. T. S. van Rooyen, Chief Journalist of the Native Affairs Department, says that it is technically incorrect to refer to Frenchdale as a “concentration camp”. He explains that a removal order may be served upon any African, under Section 5 of the Native Administration Act of 1927 (which, he says, is in consolidation of all similar legislation prior to Union), if the Governor-General deems it in the public interest. Such people can be taken from any part of the Union and dumped in one small district out in the bush. They must remain there.

(Themba 1956: 22)

Rejecting this argument, without once openly contradicting it, Themba relates Gwentshe’s story. He starts by explaining that Gwentshe was first arrested on a charge of defying the Governor-General’s order, and, after he had won his case, another order was served on him, confining him to Frenchdale. Themba then sketches Gwentshe’s side of the story: he was merely a jazz musician trying to make a living playing his saxophone. Almost as an afterthought Themba adds that “he had been some time ago president of the African National Congress Youth league in the Cape” (22), that he had led the Defiance Campaign in East London, and that he was convicted under the Suppression of Communism Act. Gwentshe’s history of clashes with the law follows. Themba argues that all Gwentshe wants is to be in his home town, Tsomo, adding that, in his battle against the authorities, he has won many of his cases. But, he explains, the government denies Gwentshe this birthright. He is removed and allocated to a house near a forest at Nelspruit, where he eventually makes friends with the locals and starts a jazz band. Again he is deported, this time because he “was becoming socially too popular and fraternising with too many ‘uncertain people’” (23). This is how Gwentshe lands at Frenchdale, where he is
given a hut not fit for human habitation. As has become his habit, he befriends his
‘neighbours’, who help him with food. Gwentshe tries to do the normal human thing –
improve his circumstances. He speaks to the Governor-General about the state of his
hut, and the fact that he is living an isolated life with no opportunities for work. He is
promised that the Governor-General would take up the matter with the Senate, but has
since heard nothing. Later the Native Commissioner, to whom he has appealed, gives
him money – from ‘his own pocket’. And, once again, he starts a jazz band. This time
he is arrested. Luckily, a friend pays his bail. He is defended by Advocate Joe Slovo
from Johannesburg and wins his case. Gwentshe can stay anywhere, as long as it is in
the district of Mafeking! With admiration Themba relates Gwentshe’s reaction:

… he has applied to the Supreme Court to have the banishment
order set aside. But he dreams … he still can dream, this man.
(Themba 1956: 24)

However, in true investigative fashion, this is not where Themba ends his
report:

“Look here, Gwentshe,” I said to him during one of his visits
to Mafeking, “I’d like to see this Frenchdale place. It’s all very
well to say the Government has a concentration camp for political
offenders, but where’s the evidence?” (Themba 1956: 24)

He then proceeds to describe his visit to the infamous Frenchdale, where he
meets Gwentshe’s fellow camp-dwellers. There is the camp leader, Bishop Kuena and
his daughter, who seem to be religious fanatics, who accept their situation. However,
another camp-dweller, P. Tsepo K. Mokwena, accuses the authorities of declaring him
dangerous merely because he “tried to express his opinion on cattle culling” (25). He
begs Themba to alert his readers to their “barren existence” (24). The elderly
Thompson Dlamini, deported after falling from favour in his Natal tribe, has also
made his peace with his circumstances. However, Matela Mantsoe, another ‘prisoner’,
does not seem to remember his crime. Themba is convinced that he “shies away from
thinking about it” (25) to be able to cope with his deportation. By briefly sketching
the personal circumstances of each of the deportees, none of whom seems to have
committed any real crime, he addresses a serious political issue: the exploitation of
poor, oppressed people with little or no hope to escape their forced exile, which they
themselves do not even understand:
As we left the camp, Gwentshe sadly said: “You leave the place sadder and quieter as it was [sic].” (Themba 1956: 25)

A commonplace view among his contemporaries (which was in fact encouraged by him) of Themba as a literary bohemian who was politically inept would seem unfounded. Themba the journalist and Themba the storyteller are one person. He cannot but dramatize factual information conveyed to his readers. Just as his short stories reflect the social and political issues of the 1950s, it seems, his journalistic reports, although based on facts, are ‘human dramas’. Chapman agrees:

I want to suggest the importance of resisting any separation of the Storytelling imagination from the social terrain. Rather, the one interacts with the other, and just as we need not give self-referring status to Themba’s own oft-heard claims of human and artistic autonomy, neither need we reduce the storyteller to the blueprints of sociology. (Chapman 1989: 20)

In “Dinokana, the Target”, published in Drum in July 1957, Themba seems actively involved in the political investigation of the practical implementation of the Bantu Authorities Act and the question of passes for women. He clearly empathizes with the people of Dinokana in Zeerust, relating how the tribesmen, after having called in the help of the local Native Commissioner Chief because of their difficulty in meeting with their chief, are asked to “send him a letter” (24). Their reply comes four years later when a new Commissioner is appointed and finds the letter, calling for an enquiry. This starts a chain of events that leads to the violent rejection of the Bantu Authorities Act, as well as pass books for women. Four men, branded as “traitors to the tribe” (25), are nearly killed by an angry mob. Reinforcements arrive in the form of a riot squad. The government even resorts to blackmail:

During one of the many visits of the police to Dinokana, the people were told: “Remember the monument!” This referred to a heap of stones in Dinokana … an agreement was made with Paul Kruger to the effect that the Bafurutse should never fight the Boers … (Themba 1957: 27)
In addition, when the people boycott white traders, suspecting them of supporting passes for women, the Indian traders are branded as agitators. In conclusion, Themba criticises the government’s handling of the affair:

What is happening … is that the application of the Bantu Authorities Act is destroying the very thing it purports to set up – Bantu Authorities. What the authorities want is not Bantu chiefs with their own power to rule their tribes according to ancient tribal customs and tradition. They want officials to carry out their policies, like passes for women. (Themba 1957: 27)

Themba’s sense of social responsibility is, once again, particularly apparent in this piece. He assists the victims of an unfair system to record their complaints, to voice their anger, to assert their identity and claim their rights. According to Chapman, in Themba’s case:

The imagination [is] working inseparably from social necessity, especially when Themba the author and Themba the journalist struggle to retain ideal categories of fictional truth and factual truth. (Chapman 1989: 20)

In “World’s Longest Walk to Work!”, published in Drum in March 1957, Themba openly incites his readers right from the opening lines of his article:

Azikhwelwa! For all its fierce passion and aggressive power, this slogan of the bus boycott in Johannesburg and Pretoria is in the Passive Voice. No one uses the Active Voice forms of “Ningazikhweli!” (Don’t board them) and “Angizikhweli!” (I don’t board them). The Passive Voice form expresses the mute long suffering and frustration of a voiceless people. But more, much more. It is the cry of the caged animal trying to find a way out. (Themba 1957: 24)

He makes it clear that the people are fed up, with reason, and that they are uniting:

What was actually happening was that the African (with all other Non-Europeans looking on) was indeed discovering that
he has a way to make himself felt.
   This is what the boycott has become. A terrific eye-opener,
especially now that the Government has chosen to look upon it as
a challenge, “the showdown”.                             (Themba 1957: 28)

Neither the people, nor the government, are prepared to give in – a stalemate
situation. The article is a hard-hitting piece in favour of the people. It lends them their
own voice, giving them the opportunity to assert themselves. Themba remains the
detached, yet socially aware, reporter, as, is claimed by Chapman, “the apparently
conflicting demands of imaginative freedom and societal commitment refuse to ignore
each other” (Chapman 1989: 20).

“Inside Dube Hostel”, published in Drum in November 1957, relates Themba’s first-
hand experiences in the hostel from hell:

I spent a couple of nights in the hostel in the atmosphere
of the riots and the fear that it has engendered – fear that
paralysed men around me and communicated itself
threateningly.                                        (Themba 1957: 19)

He describes the real horror of ethnic grouping – fights, killings, exploitation
by tsotsis. He confesses to his own uneasiness when going to sleep, his participation
in the protest marches. However, Themba is fearless when speaking the truth,
accusing the authorities of wanting the tribal fights to carry on. He also warns of the
threat of a blow-up:

There is still a fear that things will blow up at Christmas.
That doesn’t leave much time to set things right. The people
in the area want peace – and that means more than police
protection. They want prevention.         (Themba 1957: 21)

Themba the journalist seems to become increasingly hard-hitting in his criticism of
the government of the day in the late 1950s. In “Nude ‘Pass’ Parade”, published in
Drum in December 1957, his dramatic opening lines are accusing, straightforward:
Naked. Humiliated. Hoping to God time’s going to go quickly. Trying to pass off awkwardness with a shrug and wry jokes, big-shot businessmen, professional men, ordinary guys just come for a “pass” stand around stripped in the waiting-room of the Non-European Affairs Department in Johannesburg each work-day of the week. (Themba 1957: 31)

Although still by no means revolutionary or radical, Themba’s journalistic writing in this instance is a penetrating attack on the apartheid system:

The authorities claim that the humiliation of the pass naked parade is unavoidable. If they tried to give everyone individual attention they wouldn’t have time to get through their work, they say. Pressed further, one official said: “What’s so wrong with this after all? Why, during the war, old men, young men had to strip all together. They thought nothing of it.”

But, Mr. Official, Mr. Non-European Affairs Department, Mr. Everybody who thinks things like this are o.k.: We aren’t at war. There’s no emergency. We’re a civilized country, we keep telling the rest of the world. (Themba 1957: 33)

“Politics Gone Crazy!”, published in Drum in February 1958, an insightful opinion piece about the politics of his day, further belies Themba’s tag of “political virgin”. He calls African Nationalism “this new extremism, this Black Broederbond” (15), comparing the concepts of black nationalism to “the ideas, the historical developments, the very language of the White Nationalists” (15). Themba explains: Africanists claim “Providence has given us Africa in which to realise our destiny” (15), Afrikaners believe “God has chosen us to bring Christianity and Light to this continent, and we must achieve our Afrikaner destiny” (15, 16); Afrikaners claim they have a “character, a way of life, and identify that we must protect from the onslaughts of the liberals and the communists” (16), Africanists want to “protect our national identity, our customs, our traditions, and the Communists just want to overwhelm us” (16). Themba claims their histories are also similar, as both nations have been suppressed, have been “crowded against a wall” (16). So are their methods of winning
the support of their people: the Afrikaners “go to the “platteland” (16) and the Africanists “are working the countryside” (16).

In black politics, Themba argues, the Africanists deal with the “ordinary members of Congress, seeking a weapon, seeking a hold, an emotional gimmick with which to fire the people” (17). Within the Congress, Themba claims, there is a “clash about … grievances” (17), which is in fact “a small domestic matter about which certain branches felt strongly” (17). The result of this is that the leaders of these branches team up with the Africanists, causing a “decided swing towards Africanism” (17). Themba’s observation of organized black politics is astute, making his claim of insouciance invalid:

Congress is turning Africanist, and they don’t even know it.

Don’t get confused. Congress still stands for cooperation, non-violence. The Old Guard will fight to the death for a sane society. Only, there are others, the African nationalists, who think the Old Guard is too tardy.

I sometimes wish the Africanists would listen a little more to Dr. [sic] Tsele. Otherwise they are just cowboys playing with dangerous toys.
(Themba 1958: 19)

Later that same year, in the December 1958 issue of Drum, Themba, in another hard-hitting piece of journalistic reportage, relates “one of the stormiest conferences for many a day” (Themba 1958: 26). The dramatic opening lines set the scene:

SATURDAY, November 1, 1958. The threat of rain in the air; of political uproar in the area. We wait impatiently outside the Sekgapa-madi (Bloodspilling) Hall in Orlando, Joburg, where many a bloody Congress fight has broken out in the past. Scheduled to open at 2 p.m., the conference does not begin until well after 3.30 p.m. Meanwhile, feverish and furtive movements to and from a house near the hall – and another house that purveys beer – show that late-minute plans are being polished up. (Themba 1958: 27)

Bruno van Dyk’s claim that the ‘new non-fiction’ fused literary flourishes and journalistic reporting, creating a kind of hybridism, seems especially true of Themba’s
“Africanists Cut Loose”, for he successfully “obscure[s] the lines between fiction and the non-fictional report” (Van Dyk, 1994: 1558). Themba not only gives a factual report of how the political meeting is conducted, but also dramatizes the events – like the entrance, for example, of Africanists into the hall:

… a horde of Africanists enter the hall at the back, to the booming sound of heavy boots. They are a surly crowd, with a dash of Basoto blankets here and there. And with their coming, the atmosphere is galvanized into high tension. (Themba 1958: 29)

Africanists are not about to agree with Congress members, especially when their plea is to “co-operate with the whites” (Themba 1958: 29), for

in this country the people are divided into two groups only: the oppressors and the oppressed. There can be no co-operation with oppressors. (Themba 1958: 29)

Themba relates the debate that follows, reporting that it ends unresolved, that the meeting is resumed the next day, that there is a fight between the two factions, misinterpreted by the police as merely “black politicians beating each other up” (Themba 1958: 31). A new committee is elected. “New?” (31), he asks, ending his piece with an open question concerning the future of politics in South Africa:

Will there be two African organizations; one a sharp left; the other a dark black?
Will all South African politics now be extremist?
Will there be extreme Afrikaner nationalism Extreme African nationalism?
Extreme Congress policies? Will…? (Themba 1958: 31)

Still on the topic of organized politics, in “Basutos Call for Home Rule”, published in Drum in September 1958, Themba relates the Basuto people’s National Council approving a plan for self-rule, leaving it up to Britain to accept the proposed constitution. Themba covers the meeting in his usual lively, dramatic style, stressing much the same opinion as in the previous article.
The last article I want to focus on is “Brothers in Christ”, published in *Drum* in March 1956. Although included in “The Will to Die”, it does, however, not carry Themba’s name in the *Drum* version. It merely states “Mr. DRUM walks into colour-bar churches” (Themba 1956: 20). The piece carries a recognizable photograph of Themba being thrown out of a church, one of someone with Themba’s physique, seen from the back, talking to a white man on the steps of a church, one of Bloke Modisane sitting inside a church, and two of ‘Mr Drum’ entering and leaving a church, possibly also Modisane, but definitely not Themba, as he is shorter and more stout. The style of the article is not in the usual witty, wry, dramatic tone so characteristic of Themba’s storytelling. It merely gives a detailed factual report of which churches were visited, what happened at these churches and an almost abrupt ending quoting Corinthians 12:13. Modisane, in his autobiography *Blame Me on History*, remembers being “selected for the top assignment of the year, to be Mister Drum of 1956” (Modisane 1986: 190). He also recalls “a less hazardous assignment”, researching the article. Modisane relates going to the different churches, and the treatments he receives from each of them. He also remembers that “Can Themba was invited to join me in the assignment” (199), confessing that Themba was ‘luckier’ as “his personality invited a more violent reaction” (199). The eventual article published in *Drum*, Modisane recalls, “was as vital as the sex life of rose buds” (203), as the matter had by then been reported several times in other newspapers. Sylvester Stein, in *Who Killed Mr Drum???,* remembers a different version. He claims that Themba had initially been given the assignment, but, as was his habit, did not turn up: “Director and camera crew on stage, but no star, no Can Themba” (Stein 2000: 69). Stein “ordered the amiable but untried Bloke to take over the lead role and follow” (Stein 2000: 69), but, having waited for him for a while, realized he was not going to show, as “Bloke simply did not have the raw guts, he’d wilted at the very thought of offending the bourgeoise, let alone having them boot him out” (70). Stein relates later incidents when Themba did turn up and entered churches. He also does not reveal who wrote the actual article, merely stating: “We certainly had our story and we printed it” (Stein 2000: 74). Even going by his version of the events, it cannot with absolute certainty be claimed that Themba did, in fact, write the piece.
Themba has often been criticized for his lack of commitment. Unlike Mphalele and Modisane, it has repeatedly been claimed, he was not outspokenly political. He did not join any liberation movement and did not base his criticism of apartheid on an ideological system. In fact, in a sense his claim to be apolitical and his cynical wit became his ideology. Most of the *Drum* writers of the 1950s seem to have been insufficiently politically equipped. This was, to a large extent, due to the novelty of ‘city life’ and of writing for a black monthly – especially within a prescriptive framework of not offending too much. These writers, like their audience, were influenced by an imported American culture, which caused them to accept a kind of technicolour morality, cutting them off from their own traditions. Themba and his contemporaries were romanticized as symbols of the New African (journalist, writer, even gangster), and Themba, especially, as the mythical shebeen intellectual of Sophiatown, whose knowledge of literature and Western philosophy seemed to outshine that of his contemporaries. However, the *Drum* ethos was a small part of black urban life. Although Themba has often been labelled as “the alienated ‘situation’ (a term of abuse for members of the African petty bourgeoisie trying to situate themselves above the masses)” (Chapman 1989: 21), his use of storytelling in his journalism, combined with the (sometimes) ‘emotional’ treatment of his subject matter, heightens his communicative power. In the eyes of his readers he becomes a social witness – one who knows how they feel and, above all, one who cares.
CHAPTER SIX:

CONCLUSION:

CAN THEMBA: “SUPREME INTELLECTUAL TSOTSI OF THEM ALL”

It is a crepuscular, shadow life in which we wander as spectres seeking meaning for ourselves …. The whole atmosphere is charged with the whiteman’s general disapproval, and where he does not have a law for it, he certainly has a grimace that cows you. This is the burden of the whiteman’s crime against my personality that negatives all the brilliance of intellect and the genuine funds of goodwill so many individuals have.

(Themba 1985: 8-9)

Why was Can Themba unique? As mentioned before, his contemporaries all agree that he was a sharp intellectual, that he was extremely talented, that he was witty, charming and eloquent. But they also mention in the same breath that his addiction to alcohol, which killed him at the early age of forty-three, ruined his prospects of true literary greatness. Nkosi, in his obituary, regards Themba’s death at a relatively young age as one of the “most wasteful”, and mourns “a talent largely misused or neglected” (Nkosi 1985: xi). According to Nkosi, Themba’s “actual achievements are … disappointing because his learning and reading were … substantial and his talent proven; but he chose to confine his brilliance to journalism of an insubstantial kind. It is almost certain that had Can Themba chosen to write a book on South Africa … it might have revealed a complex and refined talent for verbalizing the African mood” (xi).
Admittedly, Themba suffered greatly under an apartheid regime. It is generally argued that this made him turn to alcohol as a means of coping with the unfairness of being subjected to the restrictions of a society dominated by white Afrikaner males, who did not tolerate black intellectuals, referring to them as ‘cheeky kaffirs’. However, Themba did articulate the debilitating effects of being a member of the ‘displaced intelligentsia’ in 1950s South Africa – in his short stories as well as his journalistic reportage – by making use of the only vehicle available to him – a popular monthly magazine with a black urban readership. Had he lived longer, had he written an autobiography and novels, had he returned from exile like, for example, his contemporary Es’kia Mphahlele, he might have become a respected member in a post-partheid society, albeit at an advanced age.

But Themba, it seems, was an emotional man. “Romanticism, irony, booze. They were Themba’s way of life” (Nicol 1991: 175). These are the words of Lewis Nkosi, friend and colleague, who, in 2002 in his second novel, decades after Themba’s death, admits to having used Themba as an inspiration for his protagonist:

Cornelius Molapo, the protagonist of Nkosi’s new novel, *Underground People* (Kwela), is a poet and teacher in Soweto and a member of the “National Liberation Movement”. Lewis says this character is partly inspired by Can Themba, whose eloquence he remembers from his *Drum* days. (Rosenthal 2002: III)

In “Underground People” the protagonist, Molape, is characteristically described as:

… pressing his point home with abundant quotations … it was usually late at night … in the shebeens when his drinking cronies were already in a far more receptive mood. (Nkosi 2002: 9)

“As far as his politics goes, he’s no great shakes …” (21)

… intellectual maverick … (35)

… He fell in love with politics and the bottle … (35)

Nkosi believes that:

Can Themba’s romanticism drove him in the end to admire more and more the ingenious methods of that survival – the illicit shebeens and illicit traffic, the lawlessness, the
everyday street drama in which violence was enacted as a supreme test that one was willing to gamble one’s life away for one moment of truth. Such moments of intensity and extreme self-awareness in the face of danger are what the white suburb will never know in its dull bourgeois regularity. In this respect he echoed Ernest Hemingway’s romanticism of violence … (Nicol 1991: 175)

Can Themba, according to most of his contemporaries and colleagues, was popular, ‘a nice guy’:

Can was vain. But his was the kind of healthy, innocent vanity of a child. (Motjuwadi 1990:6)

Can was a guru to most of us young journalists … (Nicol 1991: 179)

… most unforgettable character … a difficult man to work with (Mphahlele 1983: 124).

Can, a man of personal leadership and profound reasoning power … (Stein 2000: 41)

… a questioning man, a sceptic, an existentialist … (55)

A natural chief, Can, by force of personality, and an intellectual giant … (75)

He was the heart of the paper. (75)

a renaissance man by reputation…an expert on pan Africanism and on philology (speaking English, Zulu, Afrikaans, Fanagalo (a pidgin English-Zulu language) and tstsotsi-taal … a theorist on Afro-Asiatic roots … an authority on police corruption… (67)

So Can Themba was well-liked, well-known, bright, witty, well-educated. If he had been white in 1950s South Africa he would have ‘had it all’. However, he was black, he was regarded as a second-class citizen, and he drank to hide his pain. If he had lived in a post-apartheid South Africa he might have written his ‘great novel’, or he might have been a hopeless alcoholic anyway. Why, if he never fully exploited his talent, if he could not escape his hard destiny, is he a myth today?
Firstly, although the ‘struggle’ is over and ‘protest fiction’ is something of the past, Themba’s writing will never become dated, mainly because he transcended his immediate reality, keeping his mythical community alive, even if it had not physically lasted that long. Themba’s Sophiatown origins greatly contributed to the context of his expression. In the 1950s the township attained literary significance, probably because it was almost ‘excessively’ local, and certainly because Sophiatown became a symbol, in literature, as well as in politics, of a place where anything was possible. Although mostly a squalid slum, the township represented a fantasy world in which apartheid was an unreal reality. This ambiguous reality existed within the greater reality that was Nationalist South Africa, and it represented a resistance to the ‘outside world’. Sylvester Stein remembers:

> It was there in Sophiatown that Can Themba had matured in intellectual strength, and it was there at his home base, the House of Truth, where we blacks and honorary blacks gathered to debate a thousand topics ranging from Sartre philosophy to the vintages of hooch, that the discourse was at its most brilliant. And the partying too, for there we were blessed with that elaborate chain of shebeens where one could see and be seen. (Stein 2000: 93-94)

Even after the ‘Drum guys’ had ‘lost’ Sophiatown, Can Themba, informal cult figure of the township, still clung to its image, fluctuating between fantasy and escapism, harsh urban reality and a resistance to apartheid. He seemed unwilling to, formally, accept his didactic and educational responsibility as a writer within a broader culture of resistance, preferring to retreat to an imaginary world, rather than becoming an angry writer of protest fiction in exile, like Bloke Modisane or Es’kia Mphahlele. Yet, although the boundary between fantasy and reality seemed to fade, Themba was, in fact, acutely aware of his predicament. Jean Hart, the white woman Themba fell in love with, recalls:

> I fell in love with him and we had an affair eventually … what he was telling me is that this was all jolly and fun but the reality was different and you must never forget the reality … we can’t be real people in this situation… (Nicol 1991: 181)
As Themba had told Jean Hart, it was impossible to be real in an unreal situation. His personal escape from the harsh, unbearable reality of being black and bright in 1950s South Africa was, of course, ‘booze’. He spent hours in shebeens arguing, he neglected his responsibilities at work, often turning up with a hangover, not turning up at all, or leaving the office midday to nip out for a drink. But he also hid behind his humour. Mphahlele remembers:

A thing was funny for Can when it need not have been funny at all. He would joke about serious things, simply dismissing the idea that there could be such a thing as seriousness … He seemed to even want to curb his own intellect; always trying to appear apolitical …

(Mphahlele 1983: 138-139)

And in his writing Themba reconstructed a dramatized, romantic version of reality, an almost cinematic, projected version of the real, but also of the unreal creation of the real. This was his ultimate escapism from apartheid, but also his ultimate resistance to it.

Secondly, Themba was versatile. Not only could he write popular short stories for a popular magazine read by ‘ordinary’ people, managing to obtain his readers’ sympathy, by emphasizing the sentiment and sometimes even slipping into melodrama, but he could also maintain an element of ‘literariness’, because he was portraying his, and their, daily reality by imaginatively re-inventing it. Themba managed to combine light-hearted, witty escapism with sensationalized violence and sex, and yet it still seemed ‘real’, mainly because he had created an ‘unreal reality’ that was the dramatised, ‘cinematic’ version of 1950s South African urban black township life.

But he could also write hard-hitting journalistic pieces which contradict the assertions of his contemporaries that he was politically inept. Because his pieces of investigative journalism still maintained the dramatic edge characteristic of his short stories, because they bordered on imaginative literature, his ‘hidden’ political awareness was overlooked. According to Jurgen Schadeberg:
Can had that rare ability of throwing an idea into the air to look at it from all sides, fascinated by its unexpected possibilities. Not for him the crude certainty of the political fanatic. He was far too intrigued by the human comedy to drop his position of amused observer, far too civilised, too kind, too sceptical and detached. (Nicol 1991:175)

Themba was a social witness of the most sincere kind. He thoroughly explored life in a restrictive society in shocking, hard-hitting detail. Because he used storytelling in his journalism, because he did not rigorously maintain categories of fictional truth and factual truth, he was labelled a “political virgin”. What his contemporaries did not realise, however, is that this ‘fusion’, which was a ‘natural’ consequence of Themba’s individual style, as indicated previously, was revolutionary. He was well ahead of his time, for only in the 1960s in America was the so-called ‘New Journalism’ started by a newspaper columnist, Jimmy Breslin (Wolfe 1973: 25). This fusion also later became known as the ‘new non-fiction’ – an obscuring of the lines between fiction and non-fictional reportage (Van Dyk 1994: 1558). Themba’s political awareness is, admittedly, expressed in dramatic detail, making use of sharp wit and irony, but this serves as an intensification of the black urban experience:

Can Themba … grew more ironical and colloquial, affecting to beat the system with a mocking cynicism and an extreme cultural ‘underworldism’ of the African township idiom and rejuvenated tired words with an extreme imagery deriving from a life of danger and violence. (Nkosi 1985: viii)

He raised hell. It was his way of writing. His style was packed with imagery, violent imagery that sank deep into one’s consciousness and bothered one as one tried to unravel the meaning of its imagery. He was inventive and did not trade in clichés… Can had the gift and he took the trouble to employ it. (Mphahlele 1983: 139)

Thirdly, Themba had a startling self-awareness. Not only did he admit to his excessive drinking and its consequences, directly (in “The Bottom of the Bottle”) and indirectly (in “The Will to Die”), ironically poking fun at himself, but he also deliberately created an image of roguish ‘underworldism’, of ‘intellectual gangsterism’. He enjoyed being likened to the tsotsis, because to him they epitomised the ultimate devil-may-care urban experience. In his pieces of ‘New Journalism’, in a
totally unique fashion, he managed to remain detached, as the reporter/narrator, but also in a certain sense ‘involved’ as the social witness. In his short stories, especially the later semi-autobiographical and the autobiographical ones, he remained ever aware of his deliberate ‘fusion’ of reality and fiction.

Lastly, Themba is one of the most articulate writers in South African fiction. Not only is his style revolutionary and individual, but he also helped to create a hybridism of English and the everyday ‘street language’ with its tsotsitaal rhythms. (In this regard it might be wise to finally reject Themba’s claim of not speaking a black language as one of his romanticised notions of himself!) With Themba there was always also something more in all his work – short stories and journalism alike – a sparkle, a flair for the dramatic, an unexpected twist. In the 1950s, this served to capture his readers’ attention, classifying him a popular writer, according to his contemporaries, someone who neglected his true abilities. However, Themba’s imaginative writing clearly interacted with the context of its time. Because he combined his literary training and his writing for a popular audience, Themba managed to achieve a unique form of hybridism with definite, sometimes elaborate ‘literary flourishes’. Nkosi remembers Themba as an observer, always on the lookout for drama, always excited about new ideas, all of which he used in his work.

The time has come for the myths and the misconceptions to be put aside. Dismissing Themba as a ‘political virgin’ will no longer do. In his acute observations of life around him, he was an astute witness to the realities of black township life in the 1950s. That he did not attach a political label to this, or make it part of a doctrinaire programme, is to his credit – and has ensured that the appeal of his work has persisted into the ‘new’ South Africa.
INTERVIEW: JURGEN SCHAEBERG,
Johannesburg 15 March 2002

What are your memories of Can Themba?

My first impression of Can Themba was that of a learned professional teacher cum professional. He only started drinking once he started with Drum. There was very much a drinking culture during that period, and there were a number of people at Drum, who encouraged the drinking. It was illegal for black people to drink, so it was something to fight the system. You got drunk because of the system. I noticed a certain deterioration of what originally was a very reliable and sober intellectual. Before he left Drum he was living in a drunken stupor. Still being very bright and brilliant. Philosophising. [In a scene in the film Come Back Africa] he rubbed Bloke down the cheek and said if I rub this much colour off you, I liberate you that much. In other words, racism was defined by colour and that was why it was so easy to create a form of class system. There was this insight there all the time.

And his work ethic?

Can Themba was the acting editor [of Drum]. However, he was not acting at all as acting editor. There were times when Can went off to interview somebody in Pretoria and disappeared for two or three weeks. We never saw him. When he talked to you, he always talked with a pin in his mouth. It was to show off or whatever. Then occasionally the pin would disappear. And if he didn’t have a pin, he had a match. He definitely was a character.

We had a drinking culture. Ezekeil Mphahlele was an outsider. He was not part of the gang. When we moved from 176 Main Street to Troye Street, I found out something [I had not known]. There was a shebeen on the roof. Everybody was always sitting around sipping through straws out of coke bottles and it took me a long time to discover that the cold drinks were spiked with brandy. There was also the attitude of the management. Be a man and have a drink. The majority drank. It was
also the thing of defiance. I think Can Themba would not have drunk if it were not for this culture.

*He has been labelled a ‘political virgin’. Do you agree?*

Almost all the articles that were written had no sense of journalism at all. Apart from Henry Nxumalo, who was a very professional investigator, I do not think that most of the people were actually real devoted journalists. They were more writers having fun, wherever possible defying the system, and also struggling and suffering because of the system obviously. I don’t remember any great investigative story that Can Themba wrote. They were done by Henry Nxumalo. And sports were more often done by Arthur Maimane. And even Todd Matshikiza wrote stories which were from a journalistic point of view much more relevant to the paper than Can Themba’s. Maybe he should never have worked for *Drum*.

*It has also been said that Can Themba had ‘wasted his talents’. What are your feelings?*

To a certain extent, yes. To some degree it must have been predominantly the drink. And to some degree, I think, also, the system. But then others did not give up. I think once you had got into this nouveau of shebeens and heavy drinking and sitting around and not really producing anymore, it is very difficult to get out of this atmosphere. That is why he went to Swaziland. To try to get out of it. Maybe it was because Swaziland was somewhat different and maybe it could have been a place where he could have recovered, but yet he did not.

*What about the Drum days. What are your recollections?*

There was no money. What we got paid was pretty pathetic. So everybody worked on the side. Freelanced. The only people who got fairly well paid were the white business side. And eventually they ran away with the money. Some of them. What people got was very much below standard. Bob Crisp started in Cape Town in March ’51. And then he met Jim Bailey, who put in a fair amount of money. And then Bob took the paper to Johannesburg. That is when I met him. They had a tiny office and there was
Henry and there was Bob Crisp and there was a lady. She was Italian, married to an Englishman. She must have been the secretary. She could not really speak English. I then worked with them on a freelance basis. On a regular basis. And then Todd Matshikiza turned up. Only in December did I meet Anthony Sampson. In ’52 Bailey came. He got rid of Crisp. The style was an entertainment type of thing and heartbreak columns. It was quite jazzy, copying the most successful magazines internationally.

The time was different. The more educated black I would think was more educated than the well-educated black today, because they went to missionary schools. They used good English and they saw themselves as international citizens, as Africans as well, but they saw themselves as looking outwards. They wanted to be detribalised and did not believe in tribalism. The fifties writers were more widely read than the black authors of today – Dickens and Shakespeare. It is quite possible that Can Themba did not speak an African language. Or he refused to. They believed to be tribal was something from the past, and the future was to be international, looking at international literature and so on. Be part of the new world.

*Can Themba as a person – how would you describe him?*

I think that Can Themba was not bitter. Nxumalo was not bitter. I think there was a difference there. They had a sense of humour. They could laugh at things. And there were the others who appeared to be more political, but they did not have a sense of humour. They had a wider vision though.

*And Jean Hart? She was supposedly ‘the love of his life’. Did you know her?*

I knew her a bit. They were sort of the trendy movement. They were anti-apartheid, but not active to a major degree. Those were the people that ended up in the shebeens.

*What are your recollections of Sophiatown?*

There was poverty in Sophiatown. There were areas that were somewhat slummy. There were gangs. There was crime and there were cutthroats, but it was a real suburb. It had all the facilities a normal suburb has. Whereas when people moved to Orlando or Meadowlands or wherever, there was nothing there. Sophiatown was
romanticized afterwards. Sophiatown was a symbol because it was a place where people were more mixed than in other places. And people owned their own property.

_How would you describe the value of Drum?_

Maybe the value of Drum was that it was at that time the first and the only, for quite a while anyway, the only paper that represented the people that suffered from apartheid. There were others, but they were purely political. Drum was not a paper that was related to political organizations or groups. It was purely interested in human misery, purely from a journalistic point of view, rather than from a political point of view. So I think, seeing that it was the first, it is something that needs to be celebrated.

_What did you think of Can Themba as a journalist?_

I do not think Can Themba was a wonderful journalist. I think he was a short story writer and a bit of a philosopher and a dreamer. He identified with people, with movies, with dramas. He quoted speeches from movies. He identified much with Dickens, _A Tale of Two Cities_. He identified with the book, _Knock on Any Door_, from which the quote comes “live fast, die young and make a good-looking corpse”. So there was a lot of identifying with literature and movies. But he created his own identity from what he read and saw. Because he was rejected by white society, by the part of society that was the ruling part, he found it in other places.
NOTES

1 Themba (1959: 50).

2 Undisclosed reporter.


4 Crisp, Robert J., 1951. “Message from an African”, The African Drum March 1951: 2; and ”Opinion”, The African Drum March 1951: 3. Because he was the editor these were presumably his ideas.


6 Written by a “Special Representative”, unknown.


8 Modisane (1986: 94).

9 Motjuwadi (1968: 2).
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