

**ENGLISH HL 26 April 2025**

**GRADE 12 POETRY NOTES ON: This Winter Coming**

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| **This Winter Coming Karen Press** |

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| **THIS WINTER COMING – KAREN PRESS**     1. walking in the thick rain 2. of this winter we have only just entered, 3. who is not frightened?      1. the sea is swollen, churning in broken waves (violent continual motion) 2. around the rocks, the sand is sinking away 3. the seagulls will not land 4. under this sky, this shroud falling (something that covers or conceals) 5. who is not frightened?      1. in every part of the city, sad women climbing onto buses, 2. dogs barking in the street, and the children 3. in every doorway crying, 4. the world is so hungry, madam’s house is clean 5. and the women return with slow steps 6. to the children, the street, the sky tolling like a black bell; 7. these women are a tide of sadness 8. they will drown the world, 9. who is not frightened?      1. on every corner men standing 2. old stumps in the rain, tombstones 3. engraved with open eyes 4. watching the bright cars full of sated faces (more than satisfied) 5. pass them, pass them, pass them, 6. who is not frightened?      1. into the rain the children are running 2. thin as the barest twigs they kindle a fire 3. to fight the winter, the bare bodies 4. a raging fire of dead children 5. and the sky collapsing under centuries of rain 6. the wind like a mountain crying, 7. who is not frightened of this winter 8. coming upon us now? |

**BACKGROUND**

This poem was published in 1986, a tumultuous time in South Africa under the Apartheid regime. This poem, on its surface level, seems to be about the people’s fear about the impending Winter. However, upon closer inspection, it is clear that this poem is an extended metaphor for the current and coming violence in the country.

**THE TITLE**

The use of the pronoun *this* is suggests that something is going to happen very soon.

*Winter* could be read literally. However, in the poem, it can be interpreted as an extended metaphor for transition and social change that marks the death of an old order, and the emergence of a new order.

*coming* – suggests that the looming arrival of this season and what it represents, cannot be averted.

**FORM/STRUCTURE**

This poem consists of 5 stanzas of differing lengths. Each stanza deals with a different aspect of the situation. Each section is linked by the refrain: “who is not frightened?” This repetition/anaphora highlights the point that everyone fears what might happen.

**SUMMARY**

The speaker in this poem is concerned about the world she occupies and believes that she is justified to feel fear for how matters will evolve. She states that we have “only just entered”, implying that worse times are to come. The descriptions of the “churning”, “broken” and “sinking” sky further highlight her fear and Nature’s hostility. The misery of the people is made clear in stanza 3. People are hungry and suffering. The distinction between the haves and the have-nots, is clear: “madam’s house is clean” while men stand on the street corners, jobless and hungry. The “bright cars full of sated faces” drive passed the people most affected by poverty and hunger.

**STANZA 1 LINES 1-3** *walking in the thick rain / of this winter we have only just entered, / who is not frightened?*

The poem begins with somebody walking in the rain. The poet does not mention a specific person. *thick* –relates to the rain, very heavy rain. Poet does not use the word ‘heavy’ because this links with the cold that is normally associated with winter; it is thick, like a blanket.

*thick* reinforces not just the heaviness of the rain, but is also suggestive of an oppressive atmosphere. *this winter* – specific reference to the winter that is approaching, not winter in general.

*only just entered* create an ominous tone, suggesting that the experience of fear will increase as the season progresses. Things will get far worse before they get better. There is an allusion to possible violence / uprising against the oppression.

*who is not frightened?* – The rhetorical question does not provide an explanation for the cause of the fear. This suggests a universality to the experience of fear. The poet is referring to all South Africans. Everybody should be afraid as there will be violence in response to oppression.

**STANZA 2 LINES 4-5**

*the sea is swollen, churning in broken waves (violent continual motion) / around the rocks, the sand is sinking away*

At first glance, that stanza is describing the speaker’s observation of the natural environment. However; the imagery, sound devices and diction suggest an atmosphere of hostility and destructiveness that is broader than the literal reading of the lines.

The sea is described as *swollen, churning in broken waves* – this is a destructive ocean, not a peaceful and serene ocean. This emphasises that it is dangerous.

The *sinking* of the sand is symbolic of a world which is disappearing; in which one’s sense of security and stability is eroded. Therefore, there reason to be afraid.

**LINES 6-8** *the seagulls will not land / under this sky, this shroud falling (something that covers or conceals) / who is not frightened?*

*seagulls will not land* – even the birds (symbolic of the natural element) can sense the impending danger and violence, adding to the ominous mood.

*under this sky* – the present conditions

*this shroud falling* – A shroud is a cloth traditionally used to cover dead bodies in preparation for a funeral. The word intensifies the feelings of fear, anger and helplessness in the face of the weather conditions. This rain (the violence that is soon going to follow) and cold can kill those unprotected from it.

*who is not frightened?* – anaphora; repetition of the line emphasises the fear caused by the impending violence amongst the people. The figurative element compares winter to a time of political and social hardship in South Africa. Those left unprotected (non-whites) will be exposed to hardship and possibly death.

There is also a literal meaning: homeless people or people living in shacks would fear winter because they are exposed to the elements all the time. It is cold and wet. They can fall ill and possibly die.

**STANZA 3 LINES 9-11**

*in every part of the city, sad women climbing onto buses,*

*dogs barking in the street, and the children / in every doorway crying,*

In this stanza, the speaker moves from an observation of nature, to an analysis of the social texture of the city.

The stanza describes the return of domestic workers to their families, at the end of their work day.

The stanza emphasises the inequality created by the apartheid policy which also segregated the areas where people could live.

*sad women* – The women work in the city in the homes of the whites. They are going home to their families in the townships which are in stark contrast to the suburbs where they work: ‘children /In every doorway crying’,

**LINES 12-14**

*the world is so hungry, madam’s house is clean / and the women return with slow steps / to the children, the street, the sky tolling like a black bell;*

*the world is so hungry* – their ‘world is so hungry’ (both literally and figuratively). They suffer from poverty, do not have sufficient food. Also, they are deprived of their rights.

*madam’s house is clean* – they do everything for their employers. They do not have time to take care of their own homes and families.

*return with slow steps* – they are exhausted. Also, they do not have anything to look forward to in their homes because of their desperate plight.

*the sky tolling like a black bell* – The simile compares the sky to a black bell. The sky is not only black but is also ‘tolling ‘. A bell is rung at funerals, to announce a death or a sad event.

**LINES 15-17** *these women are a tide of sadness / they will drown the world, / who is not frightened?*

Metaphor – the extent of their sadness if so great that it can be compared to a sea. Just as a sea can drown anything, their tiredness will drown anything in its path. This emphasises how tired they were.

The women’s heavy sadness is a high tide coming in, so high it will drown their world and that of others. This continues the extended metaphor of a sea that is swollen and dangerous. The danger arises, not from anger, but sadness. The women are seemingly helpless to make a change in their situation, but the words suggest that this is not true: this sadness is so overwhelming it will drown (cause death) to many.

*who is not frightened?* – the anaphora (repetition of the rhetorical question) provides an explanation for people to be afraid of this winter.

**STANZA 4 LINES 18-23**

*on every corner men standing / old stumps in the rain, tombstones / engraved with open eyes / watching the bright cars full of sated faces (more than satisfied) / pass them, pass them, pass them, / who is not frightened?*

*on every corner men standing –* The men have no jobs and are standing at street corners, waiting for someone to come along and offer them work for the day.

*old stumps in the rain, tombstones / engraved with open eyes* – the double metaphor compares the men to tree stumps which are compared to tombstones. They are more dead than alive. The living trees are now ‘dead stumps’ and resemble ‘tombstones’.

*watching the bright cars full of sated faces (more than satisfied)*

They are able to see the reality of their situation. This is in contrast to the sadness of the women. These men cannot get jobs. They seem stuck in their place, not moving like the tide of the women’s sadness.

The stanza continues with the idea of social breakdown, and describes the despair and dehumanization of the men. The stanza reinforces a social divide, in which the lives of the privileged few is juxtaposed alongside the hunger and deprivation of the masses.

*watching the bright cars full of sated faces (more than satisfied) –* they look at the wealthy who drive past them in ‘*bright*’ cars and have ‘*sated’* faces. The people they see are well fed, actually overfed, unlike the townships’ hunger so dominant in Stanza 3. But the owners of these passing cars are not interested in offering them jobs.

*pass them, pass them, pass them* – They just ‘pass them, pass them, pass them’. This repetition stresses how terrible the situation is for the half dead men and their families and how invisible they have become to those passing them by each day. The repetition of *pass them* is suggestive not just of fear – but also of guilt and a refusal to confront the visible reality of social inequality. The sense of urgency conveyed in the repetition is ironic: one may pass “them*”,* but one is unable to escape the all-pervading sense of fear.

*who is not frightened?* – the repetition of the rhetorical question (anaphora) is a reminder that something has to change.

**STANZA 5 LINES 1**

*into the rain the children are running / thin as the barest twigs they kindle a fire / to fight the winter, the bare bodies / a raging fire of dead children*

*into the rain the children are running –* The reaction of the children differs from that of the adults who are fearful. The children run freely, they are active and alive. Children are symbolic of innocence, but they are also victims of apartheid. The children enjoy the rain (literal meaning). The rain, in this stanza, is related to something life-giving, while the rest of the poem presents its negative connotations.

*thin as the barest twigs they kindle a fire / to fight the winter* – The children are extremely thin, emphasising their extreme poverty. The simile compares them to twigs. They use a fire to warm themselves, because they are so thin.

*to fight the winter, the bare bodies – fight* conveys a struggle to survive the cold of winter. They do not have sufficient clothing to keep themselves war. This is the result of their poor living conditions.

*raging fire of dead children* – This seems to refer to the children who died in violent uprisings (like Sharpeville, Soweto etc.). The word ‘raging’ suggests the passion of the children and the ugliness of the system oppressing them. Children died when trying to bring about change during the Apartheid era.

**LINES 28-39**

*and the sky collapsing under centuries of rain / the wind like a mountain crying,*

*collapsing under centuries of rain* – Figurative meaning: The sky is symbolic of their oppression. It is now falling. The people sense that their oppression is going to end soon.

*centuries of rain* – emphasises their pain and suffering that they had to endure for so long. The system of apartheid, legalised or not, has become untenable. The system has been operating for many centuries but in South Africa the time for change has arrived. The time for change has arrived, however things are going to get worse before they get better.

**LINES 30-31** *who is not frightened of this winter / coming upon us now?*

The single repeated line ending each stanza becomes two lines with the addition of the idea that ‘this winter’ is on the verge of arriving. It is imminent and frightening for everyone. The purpose is to conclude with a strong warning of what seems to lie ahead.

**THEMES**

* The effects of apartheid
* The desire for change
* Impending danger - social upheaval, and a foreshadowing of the writer’s view of change, accompanied by violence, death and destruction

**TONE**

* Repressed anger
* Undertone of rebellion
* Defiance
* Fear

**QUESTION 1 - ESSAY**

* *In the poem ‘This Winter Coming’ the themes of suffering and deprivation are evident.*
* By close reference to diction, tone and imagery discuss to what extent you agree with the above statement. Your response should be in the form of a well-constructed essay of 250-300 words (about ONE page) **[10]**
* **Suggested Answer for Question A: Essay**
* The following are the points that could be included in your essay:
* Women are deprived of spending quality time with their families (children) .
* There are sad as they go to work ‘sad women climbing onto buses’
* Their own children are hungry whilst they (women) are taking care of ‘madam’s house’
* They steps are described as ‘slow steps’ (indicating exhaustion perhaps overworked) as they return home
* The children left behind are also deprived of their quality time with their parent ‘ and the children in every doorway crying’
* The sadness of women is overwhelming ‘ these women are a tide of sadness they will drown the world’
* The men, who are under normal circumstances the protectors and providers of their families are standing in the in the corners in search of job opportunities. They are described as ghosts of their former selves ‘tombstones engraved with open eyes. Whilst they stand in the corners looking for job opportunities, ‘bright cars full of sate faces pass them.
* Tone: Sombre and solemn

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1. Comment on the poet’s choice of the word “thick” in line 1. (2)

*(This word relates to the rain – it is thick, like a blanket. Textured. A very heavy rain.)*

1. How does line 2 create an ominous tone? Refer to the extended metaphor in your answer. (3)

*(This figurative winter – oppression – will only get worse – “only just entered”. Things will get far worse before they get better. There is an allusion to possible violence / uprising against the oppression.)*

1. Who is the speaker addressing in line 3? What is the effect of this address? (2)

*(All readers, in fact, all South Africans. All people should be afraid to of the Resistance. There will be violence in response to oppression.)*

1. How is a sense of violence portrayed in lines 4-5? (2)

*(The sea is described as ‘swollen, churning in broken waves” – this is a destructive ocean, not a peaceful and serene ocean. It is a dangerous place to be.)*

1. Comment on the inclusion of the word “shroud” in line 7. (2)

*(A shroud is a cloth traditionally used to cover dead bodies in preparation for a funeral. The word intensifies the feelings of fear, anger and helplessness in the face of the weather conditions. This rain and cold can kill those unprotected from it.)*

1. Suggest a reason why people would fear winter? Refer to the literal and figurative meanings of the word. (3)*(Homeless people or people living in shacks would fear winter because they are exposed to the elements all the time. It is cold and wet. They can fall ill and possibly die. This is the literal interpretation. The figurative element compares winter to a time of political and social hardship in South Africa. Those left unprotected (non-whites) will be exposed to hardship and possibly death.)*

1. Identify and explain the figure of speech in “these women are a tide of sadness (3)

*(Metaphor – the amount of sadness if so great that if it were in liquid form, it would make up a sea. It would drown anything in its path.)*

1. Explain the effectiveness of the metaphor, “tombstones/engraved with open eyes”. (2)

*(The stillness of the men is such that they seemed to be carved from stone. They have become so hardened that they seem dead, if it were not for the open eyes. They look dead but are alive.)*

1. How does the reaction of the children to the rain differ from the adults? (2)

*(The adults are fearful. The children run wildly, they are active and alive. They use a fire to warm themselves, because they are so thin. Here the rain is positive – it is negative in the rest of the poem.)*

1. To what does the “raging fire of dead children” (line 27) refer? (3)

*(This seems to refer to the children who died in violent uprisings (like Sharpeville, Soweto etc.). The word ‘raging’ suggests the passion of the children and the ugliness of the system oppressing them. Children died when trying to bring about change during the Apartheid era.)*

1. Discuss how the “sky” has changed throughout the poem. What is the implication of it in line 28? (3)

*(Rain comes from the sky and is now “collapsing under centuries of rain”. At first the sky is just that – a sky. It then intensifies to a sky “tolling like a black bell” and in the final stanza it is falling. The Apartheid system has become unbearable. The time for change has arrived. BUT things are going to get worse before they get better.)*

1. Comment on the effectiveness of the anaphora (“who is not frightened?”) in the poem. (2)

*(Includes all readers and South Africans. It serves as an emphasised warning to the oppressors – a revolution is coming. Things have to change. Remember – this poem was printed in 1986.)*

1. The last two lines of the poem breaks the ‘pattern’ of the rest of the poem. Why did the poet write these linesdifferently to the anaphora in the rest of the poem? (3)

*(At first the anaphora was one line. Now it is extended over two lines. This adds to the idea that the ‘winter’ is about the arrive. It is ominous. It acts as a warning of what is to come.)*