

Ingrid Jonker

poet of pain and freedom



Sunday Times

Ingrid Jonker (1933 - 1964)

Ingrid Jonker was born in the Northern Cape in 1933. Her mother died of stomach cancer when she was only eleven years old. After her mother's death Ingrid was moved to Cape Town and attended Wynberg Girls' High School where she began writing poetry for the school magazine. She lived in a flat after matriculating and studied commerce. For four and a half years she worked for Citadel Press as a proofreader and secretary.

Her first volume of poetry, *Ontvlugting*, was released in 1956, and Ingrid began to associate with some of the famous writers of the day, including Jack Cope with whom she later had a relationship. But before that, she married Piet Venter in 1956 and they had one daughter, Simone.

At the end of the 1950s, Ingrid and her family moved to Johannesburg where they lived in a flat in Hillbrow. During her divorce from Piet, a couple of years later, Ingrid moved back to Cape Town with Simone.

Ingrid was a member of a group of experimental and progressive writers called the *Sestigters* (the Sixty people because they were writing in the 1960s) who published a journal of the same name. Other members included André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, Chris Barnard (the writer!) Wopko Jensma, Etienne Leroux and Adam Small. They were not all 'white', and Ingrid's relatives made it clear that they did not approve of her having 'coloured' friends.

In 1963, Ingrid and a number of her fellow writers and artists resisted the country's censorship laws. This caused a terrible rupture with her father who was a member of the National Party and acted as chairman of a committee reporting to the government on the censorship system. He hoped to be appointed chairman of the proposed Publications Control Board.

Ingrid was awarded the *Afrikaanse-Pers Boekhandel* prize for her new volume of poems, *Rook en Oker*, in 1964. But her father snubbed her painfully.

She suffered from depression and anxiety for several years, before deciding that the pain had become unbearable. She committed suicide by walking into the sea at Three Anchor Bay in 1964.

Poetry as Historical Source

In this lesson plan, learners will be able to see that poetry was used as a weapon against the apartheid state as well as a way of looking forward to a time of freedom and peace. Poetry can tell us a great deal about the personal and political feelings of people in the past.



Ingrid Jonker with her five year old daughter, Simone. Ingrid describes her daughter's birth as 'one of the great experiences in my life' Bailey's African History Archive, May 1960

Ingrid and her daughter Simone, exact date unknown NALM Afrikaans Library, Museum and Research Centre

A comforting lullaby for a child or the poet's memories of her mother who was taken away by death?

Ingrid Jonker was acclaimed as a great lyric poet who brought something new to the Afrikaans language. But her poems often contained sad or even sinister references. Look at this one for example:

Extract from: 'Toemaar die Donker Man'
(Vir Simone)

Sy naam is Sjuut
Sy naam is Slaap
Meneer Vergeet
Uit die land van Vaak
Sy naam is toe maar
Hy heet, my lam
Toemaar, die donker man

Mammie...

Toemaar, die donker man

Translation:
(For Simone)

His name is Shsh
His name is Sleep
Mister Forgetfulness
From the Land of Weariness
His name is never mind
He's calling, my lamb
Never mind, the dark man

Mummy...

Never mind, the dark man

Rook en Oker, Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel, Johannesburg, 1963



A young Ingrid Jonker reading her books
Buck Jones, NALM Afrikaans Library, Museum and Research Centre

Source A: Ingrid's father doesn't want to be seen with her

'Ek het n varkagtige brief van my pa. Ek het aan hom geskryf dat ek hom tog graag persoonlike Rook en Oker wou gee, van die eerste druk wat hy versamel. En so lui die antwoord:

Liewe Ingrid,

Na wat jy teen my geodes het in jou onderhoude met *The Sunday Times* en ander blaaië in die afgelope jaar, is ek nie geneë om jou in a kafee of enige ander openbare plek te ontmoet nie.

As jy iets met my wil bespreek, weet jy waar ek woon. Al wat nodig is, is om my te skakel en te verneem of so n tyd geleë is. Namiddae van die naweke gaan ek gewoonlik visvang.

Met liefde

Van Pappa

Abraham H. Jonker.

Heeldag wonder ek of dit regtig moontlik is. Hoe en waar en waarom het dit alles begin? Die verontregting, meestal in die geheim. Dan dink he wragtig, verwag hy dat ek wat hom nie meer in die openbaar mag ontmoet nie, dit in die geheim sal doen! Nie op gelyke voet nie, nie as mens teenoor mens nie, laat staan nog dogter teenoor vader. En waarvoor? Waar begin die kleinlikheid en die verrotting en die nouheid en enghheid en bitterheid and toeheid? Waar eindig dit? (Source: Letter written by Ingrid Jonker quoted in L van der Merwe, *Ingrid Jonker: n psigologiese analise*)

Translation: I had a piggish letter from my father. I wrote to him saying that I would very much like to give him a copy of *Rook en Oker* personally for his first edition collection. And this is how the answer went:

Dear Ingrid

After what you have done to me in your interviews with the *Sunday Times* and other papers over the past year I am not inclined to meet you in a café or any other public place.

If you have something to discuss with me you know where I live. All that's needed is for you to phone and enquire whether a time is suitable. In the afternoons on the weekend I usually go fishing.

With love

From Dad

Abraham H. Jonker.

The whole day I wondered if it was really possible. How and where and why did it all begin? The (I'm not sure – suspicions? Grievances?), mostly in secret. Does he really think, expect that if I can't meet him anymore in public I would do it in secret! Not on an equal footing, not as person to person, never mind about daughter to father. And what for? Where did the pettiness and the rottenness and the narrowness and (*engheid?*) and bitterness and (*toeheid?*) begin? Where will it end?

Source B: Die Kind

Die kind is nie dood nie
Die kind lig sy vuiste teen sy moeder
Wat Afrika skreeu; skreeu die geur
Van vryheid en heide
In die lokasies van die omsingelde hart

Die kind lig sy vuiste teen sy vader
In die optog van die generasies
Wat Afrika skreeu, skreeu die geur
Van geregtigheid en bloed
In die strate van sy gewapende trots

Die kind is nie dood nie
Nóg by Langa nóg by Nyanga
Nóg by Orlando nóg by Sharpeville
Nóg by die polisiestatie in Philippi
Waar hy lê met n koeël deur sy kop

Die kind is die skaduwee van die soldate
Op wag met gewere, sarsene en knuppels
Die kind is teenwoordig by alle vergaderings en wetgewings
Die kind loer deur die vensters van huise en in die harte van moeders
Die kind wat net wou speel in die son by Nyanga is orals
Die kind wat n man geword het trek deur die ganse Afrika
Die kind wat n reus geword het reis deur die hele wêreld

Sonder n pas.

Translation:

The child is not dead
The child lifts his fist against his mother
Who shouts Africa; shout the breath
Of freedom and blood
In the locations of the cordoned heart
The child lifts his hand against his father
In the march of the generations
Who are shouting Africa; shout the breath
Of righteousness and blood
In the streets of his embattled pride

The child is not dead
Not at Langa nor at Nyanga
Not at Orlando nor at Sharpeville
Not at the police station in Philippi
Where he lies with a bullet through his head

The child is the shadow of the soldiers
On guard with their rifles Saracens and batons
The child is present at all assemblies and legislation
The child peers through the windows of houses and into the hearts of mothers
This child who just longed to play in the sun at Nyanga is everywhere
The child grown into a man treks on through all Africa
The child grown into a giant journeys through the whole world

Without a pass.

Source C: Ingrid's father muscles in on her funeral

EXPRESSMAN SPOKE TO POET HOURS BEFORE SUICIDE

"NOBODY CAN HELP"—LATER INGRID JONKER DROWNED

From TERRY HERBST

CAPE TOWN, Saturday.

A FEW hours before Miss Ingrid Jonker, the Afrikaans poet, drowned herself at Sea Point this week, she told me: "I can't take it any more. I am going to finish everything."

Miss Jonker, whose father is Dr. Abraham Jonker, the Nationalist M.P. for Fort Beaufort, stopped me along the Sea Point beach-front near the S.A.B.C. offices after midnight last Sunday and said: "Please talk to me. I must talk to somebody."

I had met her occasionally on several previous occasions, but did not know her well. As she walked past me, she called my name.

UPSET

She apologized for "being such a nuisance." She looked exhausted. Her face was drawn and there was an almost blank look in her eyes. At times, during the brief period we spoke, she seemed unaware of my presence. I suggested that it was too late for a woman to be out on her own and offered to walk her home. "I can't go back there. They're waiting. I've fixed everything."

I hesitated, but she was extremely upset. I asked if there was anything I could do to assist her.

She began to cry. "Nobody can help me any more."

She wiped her hands across her eyes and said: "Everybody has let me down. I can't take it any more, and I am going to finish everything."

I told her that things always

looked better after a sleep and repeated my offer to see her home.

"Sleep... soon I will get all the sleep I need."

I offered her a cigarette, which she declined. She kept shaking her head, muttering to herself. Suddenly she looked over her shoulder and said: "I must go. I will be looking for me."

She walked off, quickly slipping a handkerchief into her bag. "Thank you," her voice was trembling. I watched her walk in the direction of the city.

The following day I heard that her body had been found floating in shallow water opposite the Sea Point Police Station, about half a mile from where she had disappeared.

The death of Miss Jonker came as no surprise to her close friends.

I understood she had attempted to kill herself on at least one previous occasion.

CRIED

One of her literary colleagues told me: "She was an extremely unhappy woman. For years she had threatened suicide, and although her tragic death came as a great shock to me, it was not entirely unexpected."

Ingrid had a touch of genius and her death is a sad loss to Afrikaans culture.

There were scenes of great emotion when Miss Jonker was buried at the Matieland Cemetery on Thursday.

Speaking bitterly, Jack Cape, the well-known writer, threw himself on the grave and had to be forcibly led from the cemetery.

Cape, who cried throughout the funeral service, was so grief-stricken he could hardly stand.

The funeral was attended by 50 people including a number of non-Whites. Many of Miss Jonker's literary colleagues paid their last respects at the graveside.

These included writers Uys Krige, Jan Raben, Gerald Gordon, V. de Klerk and artists Erik Lombard and Marjorie Lawrence.

The Coloured poet Adam Small also attended.

Before the cortege arrived at the spot grave, Cape was led away by Lombard and Johan Cilliers. As the coffin was lowered from the hearse, Cape and his two friends came slowly forward to the side of the writer could be heard as he placed a bunch of flowers near the grave.

When the coffin was lowered he became hysterical and had to be held back from the grave. "Don't take me away," he begged, as friends persuaded him to sit on a nearby grave.

Miss Jonker's family stood together together during the service.

Mr. Krige sat beside Mr. Cape throughout the funeral.

After Miss Jonker's family left the cemetery, Mr. Cape staggered to the open grave and threw himself down, his head and arms hanging over the edge of the grave. He stared down at the coffin, weeping. He was then led from the graveside by friends.

READ POEMS

Miss Jonker's colleagues had planned to read a number of her poems at the grave after the funeral, but emotions were so fraught that the plan was abandoned.

There followed comment on rumours that they had been told they would turn the service into a political event if they did this and that the police would be called, but Mr. Krige told me: "If such attention was made it was distasteful. We merely wanted to pay a personal tribute to our friend, whom we loved dearly."

When I asked Dr. Jonker about a rumour that police would be called if Miss Jonker's friends spoke at the graveside, he said: "I was in my country when Ingrid died. My eldest daughter was instructed by my wife not to make arrangements for the funeral until I returned."

"When I heard that certain arrangements had already been made I took the matter in hand and with the cooperation of those who had made earlier arrangements, the matter was

Prevent winter colds

You can now prevent winter colds

Sunday Express, 25 July 1964

Dr. Abraham Jonker, Nationalist M.P. threatened to take stern action against a group of Cape Town writers when he learnt they were planning a non-religious service with tributes and poetry for the funeral of his poet daughter, Ingrid.

"The writers had no right to make such arrangements," Dr. Jonker told me today. After the writers had received a telephone call from Dr. Jonker they handed the funeral arrangements over to him as next-of-kin. A Dutch Reformed Church minister, Ds. J.L. van Rooyen then conducted the service on Thursday afternoon.

Source E: Ingrid talks about her poem:

Now let me say something about my poem Die Kind about which so much as been said. Go back to the days in March, 1960, when blood flowed in this land. For me it was a time of terrible shock and dismay. Then came the awful news of the shooting of a mother and child at Nyanga. The child was killed. The mother, an African, was on her way to take her baby to a doctor.

The car she was in was fired on by soldiers at a military cordon. I saw the mother as every mother in the world. I saw her as myself. I saw Simone as the baby. I could not sleep. I thought of what the child might have been had he been allowed to live. I thought what could be reached, what could be gained by death? The child wanted no part in the circumstances in which our country is grasped... He only wanted to play in the sun at Nyanga... (The poem) grew out of my own experiences and sense of bereavement.

(Source: Contrast ?tr. Jack Cape?)

Learner Activities

- By studying Source A, explain what this fight between Ingrid Jonker and her father was about.
- After reading Source B, pretend that you are Ingrid's dad at a braai with your friends. Tell them about your 'rebellious' daughter. Why couldn't Ingrid's dad forgive her? Why did Ingrid feel so angry with her dad?
- After you have studied the images and text in Source C, say why you think Ingrid's dad wanted to take control of the funeral arrangements.
- Source D is Ingrid's famous poem Die Kind later read out by Mandela. Why do you think Mandela liked it?
- After reading Source E, summarise Ingrid's reasons for writing Die Kind. What do you think her father would have said about it? Why do you think it was important for the apartheid government to have censorship powers?

Other Ideas

With the help of Language teachers at your school find out about other poets who rebelled against the government of the day.

Criteria for assessment

- Learners will be able to say why the National Party government needed more control over all media.
- Learners will be able to see that Ingrid Jonker's longstanding fight with her father came from her deep seated opposition to his racist and authoritarian politics, and from his tendency to value the politics of his Party over his relationship with his daughter.
- Learners will be able to point to Ingrid's empathy with people who suffered from apartheid politics and violence.

Curriculum Link – Grade 10&11

- LO 1, AS 2 & 3
- LO 2, AS 2
- LO 3, AS 3
- Grade 11 Content Link – how did apartheid entrench ideas of race?

