

The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BESSIE HEAD

Considered today one of Botswana's most accomplished authors, Bessie Head was actually born in South Africa (just south of Botswana), where she lived until 1964 when she immigrated to Botswana. Her parents were of different races during a time when all South Africans were officially classified by race and interracial marriage was illegal. Initially herself thought to be white, Head was placed with white foster parents since her mother was mentally ill and unable to keep her.

Discovered to be mixed-race, Head was later placed with a mixed-race family who she thought was her biological family. She was later separated from them by government authorities, causing her great emotional pain. She trained and worked for a time as a teacher but left that profession to work as a writer for various publications in Cape Town and Johannesburg. In the early 1960s, she became involved with the Pan-Africanist Congress and embroiled in political protests and controversy that harmed her emotional health, leading to depression, drinking, and attempted suicide. She met and married Harold Head in 1961. They had one child, but later separated. In 1964, Head took a job in nearby Bechuanaland Protectorate (which became Botswana after independence from Britain) where she lived for the rest of her life, doing most of the writing for which she is known. Her status as expatriate led her to explore themes of community, alienation, and exile. She died at 48 from hepatitis. In 2007, a trust was established in her name, and the library in her birthplace was renamed in her honor.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" describes what life was like for a group of incarcerated political prisoners and narrates their small-scale subversion of the prison system. Beginning after the institution of apartheid in South Africa, the system encountered so much political resistance that the government instituted repressive laws to curb it, leading to incarceration of political dissidents as portrayed in the story. The Suppression of Communism Act empowered the Minister of Justice to imprison suspect individuals without trial or right of appeal, and even without being informed of their alleged crime. Dissident groups could also be banned by being labeled Communist. Black South African leader and advocate of passive resistance Albert Luthuli won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1960 but was kept under house arrest until his death in 1966. Political dissident Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life in prison and served 27 years of this sentence before his release and election as the nation's first post-apartheid president.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Head wrote a number of other novels and short stories dealing with life in Africa and racial issues. Her novel *Maru* (1971) describes what it is like to be deemed racially inferior, and the novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968) describing the lives of political refugees is based on her own experience as a refugee living on a farm in Botswana. Other literary works portraying South Africa during the time of apartheid include Gordimer's *The Conservationist*, Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Fugard's *"Master Harold" ... and the Boys*, and Courtenay's *The Power of One*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses"
- **When Written:** Late 1960s
- **Where Written:** Serowe, Botswana
- **When Published:** 1973
- **Literary Period:** Postcolonial
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** A prison camp in South Africa in the 1960s
- **Climax:** Brille blackmails Hannetje, forcing him to treat the prisoners better.
- **Antagonist:** Warder Hannetje
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Setting. Head lived the second half of her life in her adopted country of Botswana, where she set almost all her novels and short stories. "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" is unusual for its South African setting. She also set one novel, *The Cardinals*, in South Africa.

Inspiration. "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" is based on actual events and people. Head knew a political refugee who told her that while he was in prison, he and other political detainees had humanized one of their guards. Head admitted to embellishing his story, adding tenderness.



PLOT SUMMARY

A group of black South African political prisoners, called Span One, works on the prison's farm picking cabbages. Because of their strong sense of group solidarity and lack of guilt over their political crimes, they have grown rebellious and impossible for the white guards to subdue. Consequently, they flout many of

the prison's rules: they eat cabbages, smoke tobacco, talk to each other, and enjoy more considerably more freedom than other prisoners.

Span One's special status changes when a new guard, or warder, arrives at the prison. Strict and brutal to the point of inhumanity, one of Warder Hannetjie's first acts is to severely beat a prisoner with **glasses** for a minor offense. In fact, he punishes the entire work group, and, seeming "to have eyes at the back of his head," his surveillance and authority destroy Span One's freedom. They live in fear and suffer under Hannetjie's harsh treatment until the bespectacled prisoner, Brille, concocts a plan to subdue the guard.

Before Brille puts his plan into action, the story describes his life before prison. He had been a teacher with a large family of 12 unruly children who fought with each other all day long. To escape his domestic turmoil, he became involved in political activism, inspired by its vision of "an ordered beautiful world" as well as the chance to attend conferences away from his tumultuous home. However, after Hannetjie's savage beating and then witnessing the suffering of his comrades, Brille determines to take a more practical approach in their power struggle with Hannetjie.

Brille puts his plan into action after seeing Hannetjie steal fertilizer to use on his farm. He informs the authorities of Hannetjie's theft, and the warder is strictly reprimanded. Hannetjie then pleads with Brille and bribes him with tobacco. However, when Brille is seen smoking, he again betrays Hannetjie by telling the authorities that the guard supplied him with the contraband tobacco. Disciplined by his superiors once more, Hannetjie's "nerve br[eaks] completely" as he crumbles under Brille's machinations. He promises to do anything if the prisoner will stop informing on him.

However, Brille surprises Hannetjie by not asking for the usual contraband items. Instead, he tells the guard, "It's not tobacco we want, but you." Span One needs a "good warder" on their side so that they can endure the long incarceration ahead of them. This proposal prompts Hannetjie and Span One to form a sort of alliance that benefits both sides materially as well as morally. Hannetjie stops mistreating the prisoners, and he brings them food and cigarettes. Span One, for their part, help Hannetjie by stealing supplies for his farm. Hannetjie also seems to become "good" by relinquishing his authority, as seen when he removes his gun and works alongside the prisoners in the cabbage fields. Span One, contrasting with their earlier rebellion, respond "nobly" to their better treatment, becoming known as "the best work span in the camp."

ends up winning a limited victory over the repressive prison system. Despite his poor eyesight, Brille can "see" more clearly than his comrades, and immediately sizes up Warder Hannetjie as "brutal" and "not human"—thoroughly unlike all of the submissive, easily broken warders that Span One has dealt within the past. Brille's assessment is proved correct when the guard beats Brille for his defiant attitude. Significantly, Brille swiftly removes his glasses before Hannetjie beats him, preventing them from being destroyed, and symbolically allowing him to continue "seeing" what needs to be done about the situation. A teacher, Brille was married with 12 children, but his home life was turbulent because poverty and overcrowded living quarters prompted the children to violence. This "chaos and mismanagement [...] drove him into politics," where he found structure, idealism, and escape from home in attending conferences. Now faced with a real-world power struggle in prison, Brille realizes that his previous political work was escapist, theoretical, and overly idealistic. This epiphany prompts him to take a more practical and underhanded approach in dealing with the repressive Hannetjie. When he observes the guard stealing fertilizer, Brille accepts a bribe of tobacco to keep his mouth shut—but then promptly gets Hannetjie in trouble for the theft, and then later for handing out tobacco. Over time, Hannetjie guard crumbles under Brille's cunning machinations, and offers to give him anything he wants. Surprisingly, Brille does not ask for perks or creature comforts, but tells the warder, "We want you on our side. We want a good warder." Ironically, given his near-sightedness, Brille takes a long view in forming an alliance with Hannetjie that will benefit Span One throughout the "long stretch ahead" of their imprisonment. Yet despite Brille's being able to "see" clearly what will benefit his group, his solution is at the same time short-sighted. The alliance with Brille does not improve life for prisoners outside of Span One, who are merely transformed into better inmates—"the best work span in the camp."

Warder Hannetjie – Brought in to subdue the "out of control" inmates of Span One, Warder Hannetjie is the antagonist of the story who undergoes a profound moral transformation. Brille initially perceives Hannetjie as "frightening [...] simple, primitive brutal" and "not human," and the guard bears out this judgment in his first act: beating Brille for challenging his authority. The warder's strict authority destroys the autonomy that Span One had enjoyed due to its ability to flout prison rules and frighten warders into submission. With "eyes at the back of his head," Hannetjie keeps the span in "constant trouble." His surveillance reveals the inmates stealing cabbages, smoking tobacco, and private downwind conversations. After about two weeks of enduring this treatment with the rest of the span, Brille catches the guard stealing five bags of fertilizer. It is implied that despite his absolute authority at the prison, Hannetjie has vulnerabilities, as shown by his need to steal a large quantity of farm supplies. The guard tries to reestablish his authority over



CHARACTERS

Brille – The story's protagonist and a member of Span One. Though a physically weak, **bespectacled** black prisoner, he

Brille and the work span, but cannot. Harshly reprimanded by the prison chief, Hannetjie “failed to defend himself” and “his nerve broke completely.” He begs Brille to stop the vendetta, pleading with the prisoner that he has a wife and children to care for and is being driven to suicide. He begs helplessly: “I can give you anything you want.” Completely stripped of his authority as a guard, white man, and even as an adult (as Brille observes, “the man was really a child”), Hannetjie is reborn as a “good warder.” He becomes “good and human” in a broadly moral sense, as shown by his greatly improved treatment of the prisoners—even putting himself on an equality with them, working alongside them in the fields.

Span One – The work group, or span, to which Brille belongs. Span One is comprised of ten men and is unique in the prison camp for a few reasons. They are all political prisoners grouped together to avoid the possibility of a black guard being converted to their opposition of the apartheid system. Since they have been imprisoned for political reasons and are not societal outcasts, they do not feel guilt for their crimes and “cower” like the other prisoners. This leads Span One to be more assertive than the other work groups. They have a strong sense of group identity and solidarity: “they moved, thought, and acted as one.” Because of their assertiveness and unity, they are not beaten like the inmates in other spans, warders cannot control them, and they are able to steal food and tobacco with ease. They generally enjoy more freedom than the other work groups until Hannetjie’s arrival, but due to Brille’s cunning manipulations, they get their special status back at the end of the story. In their final alliance with Hannetjie, Span One’s defiance transforms into subservience as they become known as “the best work span in the camp.”



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



APARTHEID, RACIAL OPPRESSION, AND DEHUMANIZATION

“The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses” is set in a South African prison camp during the era when the system of apartheid was the law of the land in South Africa. Instituted after World War II, apartheid mandated strict classification and separation of the races according to a hierarchy of white, colored (mixed race), and black. This brutal and racist system incited much opposition, and the South African government frequently jailed political protestors. “The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses” was published in 1973 at the

height of apartheid’s sway, and focuses on a **besppectled** political prisoner named Brille who is a part of a group of black political prisoners called Span One that is relatively successful in resisting the prison’s authority until a new, brutal guard named Hannetjie is brought in specifically to subdue them. Through its portrayal of the conflict between Hannetjie and Span One, the story demonstrates the way that oppressive authorities seek to use physical and psychological violence to break down and dehumanize those who are oppressed until they accept that oppression. But the story also shows the way that such behavior also dehumanizes the oppressors.

Violence and strict discipline are accepted as normal in the prison camp. All the prisoners are subjected to brutal physical violence and harsh punishments: “it was the kind of prison where men got knocked out cold with a blow at the back of the head from an iron bar.” The imagery of the “iron bar” both describes a literal implement of violence and suggests the cold, hard, unyielding nature of the state power behind it. A specific example of such violence occurs after Brille talks back to Hannetjie, challenging the warder’s authority: “Hannetjie whipped out a knobkerrie and gave Brille several blows about the head.” Other non-physical punishments inflicted are similarly harsh. At one point, Hannetjie notices that Brille has dropped a cabbage while working on the prison farm, and uses this error as a way to punish all of Span One by withholding three meals from them. Brille apologizes to the Span, and his fellows reply, “What happens to one of us, happens to all of us.” This statement expresses group solidarity, but also demonstrates their resignation to the harsh punishments inflicted. Later in the story, an elderly prisoner is punished with a week in solitary confinement for stealing grapes—all the prisoners, not just those of Span One, are routinely punished far beyond the extent of any “crime” they may have committed.

The prisoners are also degraded psychologically through racial epithets and pejoratives that were commonly used in South Africa during the apartheid era. After dropping the cabbage, Brille challenges the justice of Hannetjie’s punishing the entire Span. Hannetjie replies: “Look ‘ere, I don’t take orders from a kaffir. You don’t know what kind of kaffir you think you are.” The word Hannetjie uses is a racist pejorative used in South Africa to describe a black person. Equivalent to the n-word in the United States, it is often referred to as the k-word. Hannetjie’s use of it here is clearly intended to degrade Brille, as allowed and encouraged by the racist hierarchy of the time.

In the same interchange, Hannetjie also attempts to establish his racial superiority and degrade the inmates by insisting that Brille call him by his title: “Why don’t you say Baas. I’m your Baas. Why don’t you say Baas, hey?” During apartheid, black and colored South Africans were forced to use “Baas” when addressing white people as a sign of respect. The story makes clear that the prison in general, and Hannetjie in particular, are engaged in an effort to dehumanize the prisoners, to make

them feel and believe that they are inferior to white people, and in so doing to make them more pliable prisoners.

In fact, the story further captures the way that apartheid more broadly is designed to accomplish the same goals: to justify the treatment of non-white people as second-class citizens by engineering conditions such that non-white people are dehumanized even when not imprisoned. The story makes this case by describing the chaos and “extreme, almost unbelievable human brutality” that characterized Brille’s family life before he was imprisoned. Brille and his wife had 12 children because they were unable to use contraceptives properly. The difficulty of supporting this large family on Brille’s teacher salary, their lack of economic stability, and their overcrowded home led to “16 years of bedlam.” Brutal fighting occurred among the children: “They’d get hold of each other’s heads and give them a good bashing against the wall.” The story makes clear that Brille’s children are not inherently violent, but that their violence is the result of the inequities of the apartheid system—specifically, lack of birth control, education, and economic opportunity for Brille and his wife. And yet the story also makes clear that the white society that created apartheid would, conveniently, never recognize these details and would instead see Brille’s children as evidence that white racist attitudes were, in fact, correct.

The story undermines any such racist arguments, though, by portraying the white guard Hanneltjie—and by extension all defenders of apartheid—as being brutally inhuman themselves. Even before Hanneltjie does anything vicious or brutal, he is described as being obviously brutal: “His eyes were the color of the sky but they were frightening. A simple, primitive, brutal soul gazed out of them.” After seeing Hanneltjie, Brille says to the rest of Span One: “We’re in for trouble this time, comrades.” When asked why, Brille replies “Because he’s not human.” In describing how Hanneltjie’s white characteristics—his blue eyes—mark his brutality and inhumanity, the story turns on its head common apartheid practices of seeing black people as inhuman or brutal based on their appearance. The word “primitive” in the racist discourse of the time was often used to describe Africans who were thought to be less intellectually and culturally developed than their European colonizers. This portrayal is reversed in the description of Hanneltjie’s “frightening” blue eyes that reveal his “primitive, brutal soul.” And Hanneltjie does end up being just as brutal and inhuman as his appearance makes Brille suspect, which of course invalidates the racist apartheid idea that “primitiveness” is a uniquely “non-white” characteristic, with white people as the defenders of civilized society.

But the story pushes even further. Eventually, Brille finds a way to turn the tables on Hanneltjie to the degree that he has Hanneltjie in his power. But rather than force Hanneltjie to bribe him for protection, he instead tells Hanneltjie that he wants to form an alliance with him. Hanneltjie takes the deal, but what at

first is certainly an alliance of convenience over time evolves into what seems like something more. As Span One helps Hanneltjie, he in turn often responds with such generosity that it leaves the prisoners “speechless with surprise.” As he ceases to be a guard and instead becomes a kind of partner with the prisoners, Hanneltjie undergoes a moral transformation. He ceases to be brutal or inhuman.

The racist and white supremacist apartheid system was based on the idea that non-white people were inherently inferior to white people, and therefore were deserving of lesser status and opportunity due to their underdeveloped and primitive nature. Head’s story challenges this logic in two ways: by making clear how apartheid is designed to create dehumanizing conditions under which non-white people suffer; but also, through the initial brutality and subsequent moral transformation of the white jailer Hanneltjie, that in perpetrating apartheid white society is in fact dehumanizing itself. The story shows the false logic and belief underlying apartheid, and the danger that such false beliefs pose to both the oppressed and the oppressor.



IDEALISM, POLITICS, AND RESISTING OPPRESSION

“The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses” describes what life was like for a group of incarcerated South

African political prisoners and narrates their small-scale subversion of the prison system. More specifically, the story describes the political development of a **glasses**-wearing character named Brille, who transforms from a man who was originally attracted to the clean and attractive theories of anti-apartheid political activism into a man who is an active and practicing member of a resistance group, and who realizes how to use and wield political power to achieve tangible results.

Brille is initially attracted to political activism because it offered a kind of beautiful, idealistic escape. Political activism offered Brille an escape from the “chaos and mismanagement” of his home life. In his political work, “there were conferences to attend, all very far away from home.” For Brille, the world of political activism represented “an ordered beautiful world with just a few basic slogans to learn along with the rights of mankind.” By contrast with his violent and disorderly home, his experience of politics involved structure, certainty, simplicity, and an idealist, theoretical pursuit of the “rights of mankind.” However, after Brille is imprisoned, he comes face-to-face with real-world, high-stakes power struggles between prisoners and warders, and he realizes that he is “only learning right now what it means to be a politician.” He gains self-awareness of the escapist nature of his former political work, thinking to himself, “All this while I’ve been running away from Martha and the kids.” This self-awareness leads him to take more direct and concrete action, to become an integral member of his group of political prisoners, called Span One.

In contrast with his previous escapist, theoretical activism, in prison Brille becomes integrated into a group of 10 political prisoners who comprise Span One. This group is politically aware, defiant, unified, and focused on subversion of the prison system that will yield tangible benefits. Unlike the other prisoners, members of Span One do not accept the guilt attributed to them by the state: “As political prisoners they were unlike the other prisoners in the sense that they felt no guilt nor were they outcasts of society.” Their lack of guilt leads them to be “assertive” and “beyond the scope of white warders to handle.” Span One’s resistance to authority is particularly effective because they are unified. The story narrates that “they moved, thought and acted as one,” an idea that their very name reinforces. The group identity and solidarity of the Span is reinforced by their always being described as a group, with Brille the only member given unique characterization. For example, when Brille apologizes for his defiance of Hannetjie which leads to punishment of the entire Span, they reply as a group: “Never mind, brother [...] What happens to one of us, happens to all.” By functioning as a seamless group, Span One is able to fight back against their oppression in ways that individual prisoners cannot. Members of the Span engage in surreptitious defiance of prison rules and the guards who enforce them. The story plainly states, “They were the best thieves and liars in the camp [...] they had perfected every technique of group concealment.” They beat their tobacco smoke into the ground; whisper conversations downwind so as not to be heard, and pretend to plant cabbages that they then dig up and eat.

But it is after the especially brutal warder Hannetjie is brought in to beat and punish Span One into submission that Brille’s full evolution into a true politician occurs. In figuring out how to handle Hannetjie, Brille reverses the power dynamic between Span One and Hannetjie by breaking away from his earlier theoretical, abstract, and purely moral view of politics, and instead engages in techniques of *realpolitik*: politics based on situational and practical factors rather than moral and ideological principles. After Brille witnesses Hannetjie stealing five bags of fertilizer, he realizes that he now has leverage over the brutal warden and engineers a series of actions designed to gain power over the guard: he first accepts a bribe of tobacco in exchange for not informing on Hannetjie to the prison authorities, and then breaks this promise and informs on him anyway. Brille justifies renegeing on the deal with Hannetjie with reference to consequentialist ethics, where an action is judged right or wrong based on the outcome it will produce. Brille tells his fellow inmates, “I’m going to punish him severely because we need a good warder.” Betraying Hannetjie, while morally wrong in the abstract, is justifiable to Brille because it will benefit all of Span One. Later, when Brille is seen by another guard smoking one of the cigarettes that Hannetjie gave him, Brille *again* betrays Hannetjie by revealing that he is the source of the cigarettes. After Hannetjie is harshly punished by the

prison chief, Hannetjie’s “nerve broke completely” and the guard gives up, telling Brille that: “I can give you anything you want.” But at this point Brille makes another brilliant political move: he informs Hannetjie that he no longer wants bribes of tobacco, but an alliance with him. Hannetjie agrees to this alliance, which ends up being mutually beneficial. Hannetjie not only ceases his beatings and cruelty, he also actually helps Span One work in the fields and brings them eggs from his farm. And Span One helps Hannetjie by stealing fertilizer for him, that he can then use on his farm. Over time, Span One becomes recognized as the prison’s “best work span.”

“The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses” story shows how resistance to oppression can grow from theoretical principles like the ones Brille absorbed before prison, but also how such principles alone are not enough. Ultimately, the story suggests that what is required is both a motivated and unified group of resisters working together, but also a practical-minded politics that is willing to use opportunities to create good outcomes (and overlook certain possibly immoral actions), while also searching for mutually beneficial solutions to problems. And yet, it’s also important to recognize that Brille and Span One’s victory in the story is only partial. The prison still exists, they are still its inmates, and the other prisoners’ lives are unaltered. Moreover, Brille’s victory over Hannetjie ironically reinforces the prison system. Once it is in partnership with Hannetjie, Span One transforms from “out of control” into being the prison’s “best work span.” Thus, there is an implication that Brille’s *realpolitik* strategy, while effective, is at the end of the day also insufficient, as short-sighted as Brille himself.



THE POSSIBILITY OF RACIAL COEXISTENCE

The brutal white guard Hannetjie is originally installed by the prison to beat Span One—Brille’s group of political prisoners—into submission. However, after Brille manages to turn the tables on Hannetjie by catching Hannetjie stealing from the prison, he tells Hannetjie that rather than forcing Hannetjie to buy him off with bribes, he instead wants to form an alliance with Hannetjie. The guard agrees, and a transformation occurs to the prisoners and guard that suggests racial coexistence as possible, even if true equality is not.

First, both Span One and Hannetjie benefit materially from this new arrangement. The beatings and degradation of Span One cease. Hannetjie brings Span One extra supplies, while Span One use their skills at resisting prison rules to steal fertilizer for him (which he uses on his farm). Second, and more importantly, the story suggests that the partnership—in which Span One will help out Hannetjie if he becomes a “good warder”—also results in Hannetjie’s moral evolution. In other words, that through his coexistence and cooperation with the prisoners Hannetjie regains his humanity. Brille’s request for an

alliance with Hannetjie *could* have resulted simply in termination of beatings and overlooking Span One's routine breaking of prison rules. Instead, Hannetjie's "interpretation of what was good and human often left the prisoners [...] speechless with surprise." The guard actually works the fields with them and gifts them with "unheard-of luxuries." Hannetjie's actions suggest that he interpreted being a "good warder" not to mean that he would simply stop being unduly brutal, but instead in a broadly moral sense, according to "good and human" standards of generosity and benevolence. And, in fact, the story also describes Span One with similar moral terms. The story describes Span One as having "responded nobly" to Hannetjie's benevolent treatment, and that Span One soon gains "the reputation of being the best work span in the camp." Using the word "nobly" to describe Span One's response gives it a connotation of moral growth.

When read in this way, the story seems to suggest that racial reconciliation and racial coexistence are possible and achievable—that the moral growth visible in Hannetjie, and the reduced rebelliousness in Span One indicate that there is a potential path to eliminate the racist policies of apartheid and achieve a real "alliance" between races. And yet the story also contains a degree of irony or discordance that suggests such an idealistic reading is unfounded. For instance, the description of Span One as having "responded nobly" to Hannetjie's benevolent treatment seems condescending. It suggests that when Span One was, out of principle, aggressively resisting its unjust imprisonment, that it wasn't acting "nobly." The only people who would really describe Span One as being "noble" when it became "the best work span in the camp," rather than when it was the worst, would be those who ran the prison—those who saw any instance of black resistance to apartheid as being a sign of ignobility rather than nobility. With this realization comes another: Hannetjie was brought in to try to quash Span One's rebelliousness. His brutal tactics for achieving this failed miserably. But in failing, and in agreeing to become an ally of the Span, Hannetjie actually ended up succeeding: Span One stopped being rebellious, even as they continue to be prisoners (albeit better-treated ones). Span One has succeeded in its short-term goal of better treatment. But one can argue that in accepting this victory and ceasing to fight, it lost the larger war.

"The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" does seem to suggest that racial coexistence in South Africa is possible. And taking the story's plot as a model suggests that the means of achieving this sort of racial coexistence is for the black majority to stand up and take power by working from within the system—just as Brille works from within the system to ease Span One's situation in the prison by using political power to turn Hannetjie from an adversary to an ally. And yet, the fact that the political prisoners remain prisoners despite this success, implies that such a strategy offers only a small-scale fix, and not

an actual long-term solution to the overall structure of oppression. And one could argue that "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" did in fact foretell the future of South Africa. Twenty years after "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" was published, the political policy of apartheid was abolished in the 1990s, after sustained political pressure both from outside South Africa and from the black majority within South Africa. However, despite this massive victory, in the decades since the end of apartheid, racial inequality has persisted in vast differences in wealth and status between the black majority and white minority. "The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses" seems to foreshadow this outcome.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



GLASSES

The eyeglasses that Brille wears in the story take on several layers of symbolic significance. Initially, Brille's glasses symbolize his weakness and vulnerability as a prisoner. He is described as "a thin little fellow with a hollowed-out chest and comic knobby knees," and having poor eyesight adds another layer of physical debility to his character. In fact, Brille is described as squinting and blinking several times. His poor eyesight causes him to drop some cabbages, an offense that leads to the prison guard, Hannetjie, savagely beating him.

As the story unfolds, Brille's glasses come to symbolize his unique ability to perceive people and situations and to look beyond the surface. Despite being "shortsighted," Brille is able to "see" Hannetjie's true nature more clearly than other prisoners, immediately appraising him as "brutal" and "not human." Right before Hannetjie beats him, Brille removes his glasses so they don't get shattered, symbolically preserving his ability to see beyond the superficial and think for himself in spite of Hannetjie's attempt to subdue him. While recovering from his injuries alone, Brille turns his sight inward and experiences an epiphany regarding his view of politics, realizing that he had used politics as an escape. He then sees clearly how to handle Hannetjie; as he tells his comrades, "I saw today that Hannetjie is just a child [...] I'm going to punish him severely because we need a good warder." While carrying out his plan, Brille literally sees Hannetjie stealing, and this observation leads him to perceive a way to manipulate the guard. Again, despite his literally poor eyesight, Brille is singled out from the rest of the prisoners as "their good old comrade who w[ears] the glasses" and the only one who "sees" a way to deal with life in prison and forge a lasting beneficial relationship with the Hannetjie. In this sense, Brille's literal improved sight with his glasses parallels his exceptional symbolic sight and ability to see

the true nature of others, which leads to an improved situation for Span One.

However, in the end, Brille's glasses symbolize the story's ironic outcome. His ability to perceive clearly, despite literal poor eyesight, leads to a beneficial alliance with Hanneltjie. On another level, though, like Brille himself, this alliance is still "shortsighted." It does not make incarceration any better for the rest of the prisoners and Span One's improved behavior just reestablishes the status quo at the prison, as these once-defiant political dissidents end up supporting the system that led to their incarceration in the first place.



QUOTES



Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Heinemann Educational Publishers edition of *Tales of Tenderness and Power* published in 1989.


The Prisoner Who Wore Glasses Quotes

☞ Scarcely a breath of wind disturbed the stillness of the day, and the long rows of cabbages were bright green in the sunlight. Large white clouds drifted slowly across the deep blue sky. Now and then they obscured the sun and caused a chill on the backs of the prisoners who had to work all day long in the cabbage field.

This trick the clouds were playing with the sun eventually caused one of the prisoners who wore glasses to stop work, straighten up and peer shortsightedly at them. He was a thin little fellow with a hollowed-out chest and comic knobby knees. He also had a lot of fanciful ideas because he smiled at the clouds.

Related Characters: Brille, Span One

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

These opening paragraphs introduce a calm, beautiful nature setting before identifying it as a prison camp farm and narrowing the focus to one character. Here, this character is just described as one of many prisoners before his later identification as the protagonist, Brille. Symbolic connotations come into play with the imagery of nature. The sky typically symbolizes freedom and hope, but here the white clouds, representing the white supremacy that forms

the basis of the apartheid system in South Africa (where the story is set), block the sky and chill the prisoners. Given that these men are black political prisoners who presumably took a stand against apartheid, this imagery suggests that the system of racial hierarchy is depriving the black majority of freedom and hope. Describing the motion of the clouds as a "trick" suggests that apartheid is deceptive and unnatural.

Brille is introduced as noticing the motion of the clouds more closely than the other prisoners, foreshadowing his role in assessing and fighting the repression of the prison. Brille's glasses give him the ability to see more clearly, and it seems that this literal sight is paralleled by a figurative sight, an adeptness at "seeing" things others do not, which allows him to create "fanciful ideas." An unlikely hero given his exaggerated, almost cartoonish physical build, Brille is nevertheless imaginative and defiant, as shown by his smiling at the clouds, suggesting that he does not fear the white supremacy they represent.

☞ The prisoner swung round, blinking rapidly, yet at the same time sizing up the enemy. He was a new warder, named Jacobus Stephanus Hanneltjie. His eyes were the color of the sky but they were frightening. A simple, primitive, brutal soul gazed out of them.

Related Characters: Warder Hanneltjie, Brille

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 125



Explanation and Analysis

Brille is accosted by the new prison guard, or warder, Hanneltjie. Hanneltjie's full Latin name immediately establishes his character as authoritative and somewhat pretentious and exaggerated. His physical description is significant since it reverses the usual white supremacist expectations of the time. His blue eyes indicate his European, possibly even Aryan, heritage. The racist ideologies of South African apartheid typically held that blue-eyed white races were superior in all ways—physical, cultural, moral—to non-white races. However, Brille reads in Hanneltjie's eyes a different story, again highlighting his unique ability to perceive underlying qualities in others. Hanneltjie guard is not more evolved than the black prisoners—instead, he is "simple" and "primitive." Black Africans have historically been associated with racist notions of brutality and violence, as the continent is

depicted in colonialist literature as a place of mystery, savagery, and danger. However, here it is not black Africans who are savage. Instead, the white guard is the one who is “brutal” and “frightening.” Given this description, it seems that Hannetjie has actually regressed into primitivism through his participation in the apartheid system.

Up until the arrival of Warder Hannetjie, no warder had dared beat any member of Span One and no warder had lasted more than a week with them. The battle was entirely psychological. Span One was assertive and it was beyond the scope of white warders to handle assertive black men. Thus, Span One had got out of control. They were the best thieves and liars in the camp. They chatted and smoked tobacco. And since they moved, thought and acted as one, they had perfected every technique of group concealment.

Related Characters: Span One, Warder Hannetjie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

The story provides background on the Span One work group to show the significance of the changes that Hannetjie’s newly strict rules have on their status at the prison. Prior to his arrival, they had escaped the physical punishments common at the prison. Guards would routinely beat the prisoners to discipline and dehumanize them. However, saying that no guard would “dare” beat Span One suggests that routine physical punishment would have been dangerous not to them, but instead to the guard who “dared” beat them. It is thus implied that Span One has a measure of power at the prison. Consequently, white guards were unable to control them, and indeed the span was so defiant that the guards would only last a short time in their job. The keys to their success at resisting the guards are their defiant attitude, group unity, and skills at theft and deception. Through these means, they gain small comforts that might seem insignificant, but that in the small, confined world of the prison, mean a great deal to them. This influence that Span One holds over the prison suggests that, even in the most oppressive of circumstances, unity and solidarity among in the oppressed can potentially bring about improved conditions and allow them to reclaim a modicum of personal agency.

“Look ‘ere,” he said, “I don’t take orders from a kaffir. I don’t know what kind of kaffir you tink you are. Why don’t you say Baas. I’m your Baas. Why don’t you say Baas, hey?”

Brille blinked his eyes rapidly but by contrast his voice was strangely calm.

“I’m twenty years older than you,” he said. It was the first thing that came to mind, but the comrades seemed to think it a huge joke. A titter swept up the line. The next thing Warder Hannetjie whipped out a knobkerrie and gave Brille several blows about the head.

Related Characters: Brille, Warder Hannetjie (speaker), Span One

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 126-127



Explanation and Analysis

After Hannetjie catches Brille eating cabbages, he punishes all of Span One, denying them three meals as reprimand for Brille’s infraction. Brille challenges the injustice of this punishment, and in this conversation, Hannetjie reestablishes his authority. First, he degrades Brille with a racial slur, putting him in a lower status as part of a stereotyped, stigmatized group. Brille is unfazed by this verbal assault, as shown by his calm voice. Hannetjie next insists that Brille address him with the title “Baas” instead of his name. Brille replies that he doesn’t call the guard “Baas” because as Hannetjie’s elder, Brille does not feel inferior to him. He uses a different criterion—one of age and experience—rather than the racist one Hannetjie insists on, choosing to actively resist Hannetjie’s authority despite the insistence on every level of South Africa’s segregated society that white men like Hannetjie are inherently superior. The laughter coming from the other prisoners shows their amusement at seeing the slight and shortsighted Brille verbally fencing with the guard—and winning. Unable to subdue Brille with language, Hannetjie beats him, reestablishing with violence his authority both as a prison guard and as a white man.

“Let’s face it,” he thought ruefully. “I’m only learning right now what it means to be a politician. All this while I’ve been running away from Martha and the kids.”

And the pain in his head brought a hard lump to this throat. That was what the children did to each other daily and Martha wasn’t managing and if Warder Hannetjie had not interrupted him that morning, he would have sent the following message: “Be good comrades, my children. Cooperate, then life will run smoothly.”

Related Characters: Brille (speaker), Warder Hannetjie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

While Brille recovers from the injuries inflicted by Hannetjie, the story shifts to focus on Brille’s life before prison. He was a poor teacher, married with a large family. Apartheid meant that the family lived with few resources in overcrowded conditions, which led Brille’s children to fight constantly, sometimes assaulting each with savage violence. Brille escaped this chaotic domestic world by attending political conferences away from home.

In this passage, Brille experiences an epiphany while reflecting on his past life in relation to the present moment, realizes the escapist nature of his previous political involvement, which presumably led to his arrest as a political prisoner. In his power struggle with Hannetjie over the material conditions of life at the prison, he is coming to understand political resistance as practical, not theoretical—he must work subtly *within* the system rather than conspicuously rising up against it in order to enact change. Moreover, the pain from his beating causes him to empathize with his children for the first time, understanding the visceral, brutal physical consequences of racial injustice. As another part of his realization, he ponders that without this new sense of empathy, his imagined message to his children to “cooperate” rather than to resist would have been merely an abstract moral platitude.

“Prison is an evil life,” Brille continued, apparently discussing some irrelevant matter. “It makes a man contemplate all kinds of evil deeds.”

He held out his hand and closed it.



“You know, comrades,” he said, “I’ve got Hannetjie. I’ll betray him tomorrow.”

“Forget it, brother. You’ll get shot.”

Brille laughed.

“I won’t,” he said. “That is what I mean about evil. I am a father of children, and I saw today that Hannetjie is just a child and stupidly truthful. I’m going to punish him severely because we need a good warder.”

Related Characters: Span One, Brille (speaker), Warder Hannetjie

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

After Brille gives tobacco to his fellow prisoners in Span One, he tells them that Hannetjie had provided him with it as a bribe. Brille saw Hannetjie stealing supplies and took the contraband tobacco in exchange for his silence. Brille becomes philosophical before revealing his plan to betray Hannetjie. He uses terms like “good” and “evil,” suggesting that he is thinking about his actions within the abstract, theoretical political frameworks he learned before prison. He rationalizes his betrayal by saying that prison overall is “evil” and that its moral corruption planted the seed of betrayal in him. His technically immoral act is thereby justified in his mind because he was driven to it by the “evil life” of prison. Moreover, betraying the guard will have the positive result of benefiting Span One, so it is not an entirely selfish act. Brille seems cool and collected since he has seen that Hannetjie is “just a child” who can be manipulated and controlled as Brille did with his own children. The other members of the span advise Brille to submit, showing that they are less defiant and heightening Brille’s characterization as particularly perceptive, rebellious, and crafty.

●● One day, at the close of work warder Hannetjie said:

“Brille, pick up my jacket and carry it back to the camp.”



“But nothing in the regulations says I’m your servant, Hannetjie,” Brille replied coolly.

“I’ve told you not to call me Hannetjie. You must say Baas,” but Warder Hannetjie’s voice lacked conviction. In turn, Brille squinted up at him.

“I’ll tell you something about this Baas business, Hannetjie,” he said. “One of these days we are going to run the country. You are going to clean my car. Now, I have a fifteen-year-old son, and I’d die of shame if you had to tell him that I ever called you Baas.”

Warder Hannetjie went red in the face and picked up his coat.

Related Characters: Brille, Warder Hannetjie (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

After Brille informs on Hannetjie to his superiors, the guard attempts to reestablish his authority over the prisoner. He does so by ordering Brille to perform a menial task, but Brille refuses. His refusal is significant in that Brille defines his identity for himself, denying that he is Hannetjie’s “servant” and thus retaining his dignity despite the racial discrimination as a black man and mistreatment as a prisoner he continually faces. Moreover, Brille defines himself thus with reference to prison regulations, implying that they trump the guard’s authority and that Brille understands them more fully than Hannetjie, again refuting the notion that white men like Hannetjie are inherently superior or more intelligent than black men like Brille. Hannetjie does not contradict Brille’s defiance, showing his growing passivity and “lack of conviction” about his authority, which he tries again to reassert by half-heartedly telling Brille call him “Baas.” Again, Brille refuses, and then he shows an understanding that his power struggle with Hannetjie, though seemingly minor, is really part of the larger struggle against the South African apartheid system. His refusal to serve and defer to Hannetjie is itself a political act with larger implications, representing an evolution for Brille from his earlier, theoretical view of political activism.

●● “It’s not tobacco we want, but you,” he said. “We want you on our side. We want a good warder because without a good warder we won’t be able to manage the long stretch ahead.”

Warder Hannetjie interpreted this request in his own fashion, and his interpretation of what was good and human often left the prisoners of Span One speechless with surprise.

Related Characters: Brille (speaker), Warder Hannetjie, Span One

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

At the story’s end, Brille reveals his goal to Hannetjie: that he wishes to form an alliance between the Span One work group and Hannetjie. Brille shows that he is thinking pragmatically rather than theoretically about what will benefit Span One throughout their long incarceration. Looking ahead to the future, Brille realizes that having the guard as an ally will benefit the span in the long run. His request that Hannetjie be “a good warder” ends up having a double meaning—Hannetjie will be “good” in a practical sense of no longer mistreating the prisoners, and the guard’s “interpretation of what was good and human” involves a degree of moral development. Span One is surprised that the “inhuman” Hannetjie possesses the capacity of generosity and benevolence, suggesting that although the prisoners are an oppressed group, they still possess the human tendency to oversimplify and dehumanize others just as they are dehumanized.

Hannetjie agrees to Brille’s proposal, and Span One develops a mutually beneficial relationship with Hannetjie in which they peacefully trade resources and services. The story’s conclusion suggests that racial coexistence is possible when members of a subordinate group challenge the system by taking power for themselves within it, compelling the dominant group to work *with* them instead of oppressing them. In this process, the dominant group can benefit as well—like Hannetjie, other oppressors can become more “good and human” if they so choose.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE PRISONER WHO WORE GLASSES

It is a calm, quiet day on a prison camp farm, with “scarcely a breath of wind” blowing over rows of bright green cabbages. White clouds drift overhead, occasionally blocking the sun and the “deep blue sky” and sending a “chill” down that backs of the workers on the farm. A thin man with **glasses** looks up at the clouds, imagining that they could carry a message to his children a hundred miles away.

The prisoner’s reverie is interrupted by an address from the warder, or prison guard: “Hey, what do you think you’re doing, Brille?” The new warder, Hanneltjie, appears ominous, with sky-colored eyes that are “frightening” because they reveal “a simple, primitive, brutal soul.” Brille tells his fellow prisoners that they are “in for trouble” because the new warder is “not human.”

Hanneltjie was brought in to try to subdue this particular work group, Span One. At this prison, violent and harsh treatment of prisoners is common, yet Span One has so far escaped such treatment for a few reasons. These 10 men are political prisoners, grouped together so as not to corrupt a black warder. They are not subservient since they feel no guilt for their crimes. Instead, they are assertive, unified, and underhanded, enabling them to game the prison system to obtain perks. “It was beyond the scope of white warders to handle assertive black men.”

The initial description of the setting depicts a seemingly peaceful, picturesque scene on a South African farm. The placid setting contrasts with the description of the prisoners who work on the farm who experience a “chill” as the clouds obscure the sun. The titular character peers up at the clouds, as if yearning for freedom even if only in his imagination, and his daydreaming and desire to connect with his faraway children shows him to be imaginative and tender-hearted.



The sudden interruption of the guard shows how the prisoners on this work farm are never really free, even in their thoughts. Hanneltjie’s physical description conveys his character traits: his sky-colored eyes should represent vastness and freedom, but instead they invoke fear. Moreover, Hanneltjie’s blue eyes would seem to mark his superiority as a white man in South Africa, but Brille sees through them into truth of the guard’s soul. The apartheid system has dehumanized Hanneltjie, rendering him “primitive” and “brutal.” This is typically how non-white people were described under South Africa’s apartheid, but in Hanneltjie’s depiction, Head shows how apartheid has instead dehumanized the white oppressors.



Despite imprisonment at an institution known for its violence and brutality, Span One has been able to find ways around their oppressive treatment. Unlike the other prisoners who may have committed violent crimes, these political prisoners feel no guilt for their actions since they know the apartheid system that calls them criminals is itself unjust. Through unity and deception that they feel is justified, the prisoners of Span One have been able to resist the prison authorities’ harsh treatment and obtain small comforts to make their incarceration more tolerable. Their successful, unified defiance of the “white warders” shows the political potential of the oppressed black majority when they unify around a common goal.



Hannetjie's authority interrupts Span One's freedom. He begins by asserting his authority over Brille, whose moniker is a nickname coming from the Afrikaans word for **glasses**. Unable to judge distances well because of his poor eyesight, Brille drops the cabbage he is eating in front of the warders. Usually warders overlook such minor offenses, but Hannetjie doesn't. As punishment, Hannetjie denies the whole span three meals.

Brille then challenges Hannetjie's authority, questioning the justice of punishing all of Span One for his error. The guard grows angry, saying, "I don't take orders from a kaffir." He asks why Brille won't call him "Baas," a term of respect. Brille calmly replies that he doesn't call him that because he is 20 years older than the Hannetjie. The other prisoners laugh, but then Hannetjie hits Brille several times on the head with a club. Before being assaulted, Brille deftly manages to remove his **glasses** so that they don't get shattered.

Later, Brille apologizes to Span One and promises to steal something for them to eat. They reply that "What happens to one of us, happens to all." Though Hannetjie's beating was the first time Brille had been the object of violence, he is no stranger to witnessing it. Before prison, he was a teacher and married with 12 children. He and his wife had such a large family because they didn't manage contraception properly, and their poverty and overcrowded home led the children to fight with each other viciously. He and his wife had worked out a system that specified the children could fight all they liked until Brille arrived home. This plan gave Brille a sense of power, of even being like a "godhead" because of his ability to pacify violence.

Nicknames in prison are common, but Brille's also shows the extent to which the prison system attempts to rob inmates of their humanity by taking away their real names and instead reducing them to one-dimensional defining characteristics, like the fact that Brille wears glasses in this case. Brille's carelessness with the cabbage demonstrates the freedom he and other members have achieved for themselves, since he doesn't even feel the need to hide the fact that he was breaking prison rules by eating the farm's produce. In punishing all of Span One for Brille's offense, Hannetjie essentially proves that Brille was right in his perceptive assessment of the guard's underlying brutality.



Hannetjie's inhumanity is further shown when he responds to Brille's logical questioning of the punishment by degrading him with the use of "kaffir," an offensive racial slur. He further asserts his dominance and demands that Brille show his inferior status by addressing him as "Baas." When Brille refuses and insinuates that he is in fact the guard's superior because of age, Hannetjie again proves his brutality with violent physical punishment. Brille's swift removal of his glasses, by contrast, shows his quick-wittedness, which stands in opposition to Hannetjie's reliance on brute force, rather than intellectual tactics, to subdue the prisoners.



Span One shows their strong sense of unity in their response to Brille's apology. Moreover, the story shows their solidarity by always having them speak as a group, not as individual prisoners. In a flashback, it is revealed that Brille's life before prison had been affected by the inequality of the apartheid system. Lack of education about contraception combined with his low-paying employment led his children to the violent savagery expected of black people in the racist society of the time. Brille concocted a plan to keep the children in check, containing their violent tendencies. This detail reveals Brille's keen ability to quell the violence of others, which foreshadows the fact that he, as the only prisoner the narrative singles out from the rest of Span One, maybe be able to put a stop to Hannetjie's violence as well.



Even though he was not subject to violence himself at home, Brille escaped from this chaos through political work. There he found an “ordered beautiful world” of “a few basic slogans” in pursuit of “the rights of mankind.” He could escape from his home by attending distant conferences. The pain from his beating now makes him understand the reality of his children’s violence: “That was what the children did to each other daily.” If Hanneltjie hadn’t hit him, Brille imagines he would have sent a message to his children by the clouds: “Be good, comrades, my children. Cooperate, then life will run smoothly.”

Hanneltjie continues to crack down on the prisoners, sentencing Brille to a week in solitary confinement for stealing grapes. His rule ends the freedom and defiance of Span One. With “eyes at the back of his head,” he discovers the tricks that have allowed them to eat cabbages, smoke tobacco, and talk amongst themselves with impunity. Under constant surveillance and without these small comforts that make prison life bearable, Span One lives for two weeks in “acute misery.”

One night, however, Brille surprises his fellows with contraband tobacco. He explains that Hanneltjie gave it to him. Brille saw him stealing five bags of fertilizer, and Hanneltjie bribed him to keep quiet. Yet Brille plans to betray Hanneltjie to the prison authorities. Brille reflects that Hanneltjie is “just a child and stupidly truthful.” Brille justifies his betrayal by saying that prison is “an evil life” that “makes a man contemplate all kinds of evil deeds.” Moreover, he wants to punish Hanneltjie because Span One needs “a good warder.” Brille testifies to the prison authorities on Hanneltjie’s theft. Hanneltjie confesses and is fined.

Away from the chaos created by Brille’s children, politics for him were orderly, clear, idealistic, and largely theoretical in comparison. However, being beaten himself for the first time causes Brille to develop empathy for his children’s behavior and begins to change his view of politics. His physical pain connects him imaginatively with the experience of his children suffering under the injustice of white supremacy, since their outbursts suggest that they were hungry, under-stimulated, or otherwise suffering and thus acted out. Further, Brille develops some self-awareness, imagining that if Hanneltjie hadn’t beaten him, he would have sent the children a message to obey and “cooperate” with their circumstances rather than to rise up, since resistance is what led to his imprisonment. He realizes that his view of politics has been too theoretical and idealistic, metaphorically “in the clouds,” and thus landed him in his current situation where he is unable to take action as an activist or as a father.



Emboldened by his successful repression of Brille’s defiance, Hanneltjie continues his harsh rule, enacting cruel treatment that parallels the white-on-black oppression and violence happening outside the prison walls in the South African apartheid. Though the prisoners of Span One have been able to resist and gain meager doses of freedom, Hanneltjie’s surveillance strips them entirely of their agency. To describe the prisoners going without cabbages and tobacco for two weeks as “acute misery” might seem overstated. However, this description shows how important seemingly small things can be to inmates, both to their physical comfort and sense of humanity in having some say over their existence.



The story reveals the results of Brille’s manipulation of Hanneltjie before explaining how he obtained this perk from the guard. Ironically, given his poor sight, Brille is the one to see Hanneltjie stealing and subsequently blackmail him. However, Brille then betrays the guard, going back on the deal. He justifies the betrayal by saying that the overall situation of prison is “evil,” and that this pervasive immorality is what made him go back on his word. Moreover, the betrayal is justified because it will benefit Span One by turning Hanneltjie into a good warder. In this sense, it’s clear that the end justifies the means from the prisoners’ point of view, even if that means stooping to dishonesty and manipulation.



The next day, Hannetjie attempts to reestablish his authority over Brille by ordering him to perform menial tasks and insisting on being called “Baas.” Brille refuses to submit, insisting that he is not the guard’s servant, and he explains his lack of obedience with reference to the larger political context. He tells Hannetjie that one day black people will “run the country” and white men like Hannetjie will clean Brille’s car. He also says he would be ashamed if his 15-year-old son learned he had called a white man “Baas.”

Hannetjie again tries his earlier strategy of degrading Brille with racially charged language in order to put him back in his place. However, Brille has become emboldened by his successful blackmail and betrayal of the guard. Brille’s response to Hannetjie shows his growing political consciousness. He is taking a long view of political change in South Africa, predicting that one day the black majority will be in power and the white minority will lose its privileged status. He also thinks of the future in referring to his son. This section shows that Brille has begun to marry his abstract political principles with real-world applications. He sees that his defiance of Hannetjie, a white man, is a small-scale act of resistance, but is part of the larger trajectory of South African historical progress toward racial equality.



Brille is caught smoking tobacco and again informs on Hannetjie, telling the authorities that Hannetjie gave him the contraband tobacco. Hannetjie crumbles upon being reprimanded: “his nerve br[eaks] completely.” He pleads with Brille to stop betraying him, referring to his wife and children and claiming he is being driven to suicide. He begs, “I can give you anything you want.” Brille replies that it’s not just about him. “The whole of Span One wants something from you,” he tells Hannetjie.

Brille’s cunning manipulation of Hannetjie deepens when he informs on Hannetjie again. Moreover, his possession of tobacco—the contraband the guard had tried to use to bribe him into compliance—is the very thing that gets Hannetjie in trouble. The guard loses all his authority both in his response to being disciplined and in his plea to do anything Brille wants him to do. Brille finally reveals his ultimate goal to the guard: not just personal gain, but benefit to the entire work group, again highlighting the importance of unity and solidarity for oppressed groups like the political prisoners of Span One.



With Hannetjie under his thumb, Brille feels pity for the first time, realizing “the man was really a child.” Brille also feels guilt for the first time, wondering “if he had carried the whole business too far.” Brille surprises Hannetjie by not asking for tobacco or other contraband items. Instead, Brille asks, on behalf of Span One, for a sort of alliance with Hannetjie. Brille explains, “It’s not tobacco we want, but you.” He wants the guard “on [their] side” as a “good warder” who can help them “manage the long stretch ahead.”

With Hannetjie finally disempowered, Brille’s heart softens to him. Calling the guard “a child” connects him figuratively to Brille’s own children. He seems to realize now that both sides have been brutalized by the apartheid system, made violent and immoral through immersion in its injustice: Brille’s children because of poverty, Hannetjie because of his attempt to embody white supremacy. In this sense, Head is commenting more broadly on the nature of discrimination, as racist systems like the South African apartheid hurt not only the oppressed, but also the oppressors. Despite his unjust circumstances, Brille is shown taking a practical and forward-thinking view of prison life in order to survive. Having Hannetjie as an ally rather than adversary will help Span One endure the rest of their incarceration, just as a unified effort will be necessary to overcome apartheid.





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