

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 *Sestigers* (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