Contributor: Kgomotso Masemola

Entry: Themba, Daniel Canadoise D’Orsay (Can) (1924-1967)

Born in the Marabastad township location of Pretoria, Can Themba early distinguished himself by winning the Mendi Memorial Scholarship, which enabled him to attend Fort Hare University, from where he graduated with a BA in 1947. He went on to earn a teacher’s diploma from Rhodes University. The same year that he graduated he published his first short story in the student journal, The Fort Harian. He taught for brief spells at the Western Native High School and the Central Indian High School on the outskirts of Johannesburg, but was always more interested in writing than teaching. He won the first Drum magazine short story competition for his work ‘Mob Passion’ in 1953, competing with a thousand entries from home and abroad, including works by Cyprian Ekwensi and Bloke Modisane. Peter Abrahams, one of the judges of this competition, was highly impressed with his writing. Later, Langston Hughes was to be similarly impressed. Soon Themba was catapulted from his erstwhile teaching career into full-time journalism on both Drum and Africa! magazines.

By the late 1950s Themba’s colleagues had been forced into exile because of the political situation in South Africa. He himself was shamed into voluntary exile in Swaziland after he had been fired, as a consequence of his addiction to alcohol. He took up a teaching post there, at St. Joseph’s Catholic Mission School. In 1963 he launched his own literary journal, The Classic. In 1966 his writing was banned in South Africa. He died from a thrombosis in September 1967.

As one of the literary figureheads of the influential Drum magazine, he was among the most important black writers of his era. His oeuvre underscores a preoccupation with what he called ‘the shadow lives’ of urban existence, going beyond mere nostalgia to capture the anxieties attending the transient vibrancy of, say, Sophiatown, for which he wrote a ‘Requiem’. Also very moving is his tribute to Nat Nakasa, ‘Quo Vadis’, following the latter’s suicide in New York. His short story, ‘The Suit’, is a meticulous study of the psychological vectors of cuckoldry. His work, including short stories, journalistic pieces and literary essays such as ‘Through Shakespeare’s Africa’, also appeared in outlets other than Drum, notably the radical monthly, New African, whose literary editor was Lewis Nkosi. The best-known collections of Can Themba’s works are the twice issued The Will to Die (1972, 1982), edited by Donald Stuart and Roy Holland for the Heinemann African Writers Series; The World of Can Themba (1985), edited by Essop Patel for Ravan Press; and the Penguin Modern Classics, Requiem for Sophiatown (2006), edited by Stephen Gray.

**References and further reading**

Gosani, B. and J. Schadeberg (1987) *The Fifties People of South Africa*, South Africa: Bailey’s African Photo Archives.

Sampson, A. (2005) *Drum: The Making of a Magazine*, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers.

**List of works**

*The Will to Die* (1972)

*The World of Can Themba* (1985)

*Requiem for Sophiatown* (2006)