

A) Read THE DEBT by Ginny Swart.

B) LITERARY CRITIQUE

- 1) How does Becker's attitude toward his employees differ from that of his son?
- 2) At the beginning of the story, Andre Becker wonders to himself where his son Nico's "harsh streak" came from. Can you explain it?
- 3) What is ironic about the fact that Kanyiso borrows Nico's books?
- 4) Why does Kanyiso insist that he must have a marble headstone, regardless of the cost?
- 5) Explain the verbal irony in the following: "Perfect," she said with satisfaction. "No one would ever guess it used to be a headstone."
- 6) What stereotype does Swart wish to dispel when she recounts Kanyiso's professional success?
- 7) Why do you think the author ends the story where she does?
- 8) Describe the irony implicit in the location where the final scene of the story is played out.

C) ESSAY QUESTIONS

- 1) How does Nico's character bring about the outcome of the story? What part has Marie played in it? In a three-to-four paragraph essay, discuss these two questions. Finally, in your conclusion, present your opinion as to who is more at fault and why.
- 2) The title of the story is "The Debt". Do you believe that Kanyiso discharged his debt to Nico's father, or is it still owed? Is Kanyiso obliged to do anything for Andre's son?

**ENGLISH LITERATURE WEEK SIX Mr. WIDELITZ**

**Literary Critique**

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# The Debt

Ginny Swart

## FOCUS: CHARACTERIZATION; IRONY

*What character trait does Nico reveal?*

"These stupid funerals go on for ever, Pa," complained Nico Becker. "Yesterday was bad enough, all that wailing and chanting. Now they're still at it. They're well into the second pot of beer."

*What do Andre Becker's comments to himself imply?*

Andre Becker looked expressionlessly at his son, at seventeen a solid wall of muscle towering over his father. Muscle between the ears too, thought Andre gloomily. God knows what's going to happen to this place when I'm gone.

"That's their way. Funerals are important to them. And Kiepie was a good old man, our best worker. This farm's going to miss him."

"Maybe you could train his son. Kanyiso's not as stupid as most of them. Although we won't get much out of him tomorrow, they'll probably be half asleep after all that beer."

*What do we learn about Nico and Andre from their comments about Kanyiso?*

"Not Kanyiso. He's not a drinker. But his dad's funeral will keep him busy, all right. I reckon there're about two hundred people over there. He killed six goats for the funeral."

"Did he pay for them?"

Andre frowned. "Kiepie was born on this farm! He worked for your granddad and he worked for me, all his life. I'm not going to ask his son to pay for a couple of goats."

*What do Nico and Kanyiso have in common?*

Sometimes he wondered where Nico's harsh streak came from.

Not from his gentle mother, who'd died when he was ten. And not from me, thought Andre, remembering the book full of IOU's he kept in the desk drawer. I'm too

soft with everyone. I could have bought an American five-gaiter\* on what these guys owe me.

"Remember how you and Kanyiso used to play together? He's always been a smart kid. Good with the horses, too."

"Ja." Nico sat slicing biltong\* and chewing rhythmically, his feet on the low wall of the stoep.\* "It's quite funny, he collects all my old books when I come back for the holidays. The other day he asked me if I had any test tubes he could borrow! He'd been reading my last year's science book, but I bet he didn't understand a word of it."

"Probably more than you did, judging by your reports. Ah well, I suppose you're pleased that's all over with."

"Ja. Couldn't have stood another two years at school. Don't need history and all that junk to run a farm."

His father privately disagreed, but failing six out of seven subjects was probably a sign that it was time for Nico to start work fulltime on *Wonderkloof*.\*

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"Kanyiso wants to talk to you, Dad. I told him you having supper but..."

"That's okay."

Andre pushed himself away from the table and went onto the stoep where Kanyiso stood, erect and dark. Moths battered themselves against the dim light.

"Mr. Becker, I have need to borrow some money, please."

Strange, even as a little boy Kanyiso never called me *Baas*,\* thought Andre. And he's always looked me straight in the eye, none of this shuffling about. Probably why I like him so much.

"What do you need it for?"

"It is one year since my father died and now we must put up a headstone for his grave, Mr. Becker."

**five-gaiter** — a strong work or show horse that is able to move well at different speeds, e.g., galloping, trotting, etc.

**biltong** — (South African) strips of lean meat dried in the open air.

**stoep** — (Afrikaans) a porch.

**Wonderkloof** — (Afrikaans) "Beautiful Gorge," the name of the Becker farm.

**Baas** — (Afrikaans) boss; a title implying respect.

*Why might Kanyiso ask Nico for his books?*

*What have we already learned about Kanyiso?*

*In which two areas have Nico and his father disagreed so far?*

*What is it about Kanyiso's behavior that causes Andre to like him?*

**HELPFUL DEFINITIONS**

"A headstone. Ah, well, we could make you one out of cement. When old Moses died we —"

"No, Mr. Becker. For my father our family must have a marble headstone. With his name dug deep into the stone."

"Marble? That'll cost a packet.\* How much do you need?"

"Four thousand rands,\* Mr. Becker."

"*What?* Are you crazy, Kanyiso? I can't lend you that sort of money. That's more than you'll earn in two years."

"Mr. Becker, I will pay the money back. I'm going to get a job in Bloemfontein,\* earn big money. I will pay you back very soon."

"Don't be silly. You won't find a job in town, your place is on the farm."

"No, Mr. Becker. I am leaving. My brother Sizwe will do my work."

"Sizwe's only sixteen, what does he know?"

"Mr. Becker, I've taught him everything, he's strong. He can drive the tractor. He knows about the planting."

Andre was silent, looking at the tall, earnest young man.

Since his father's death, Kanyiso had become invaluable. He was like an extension of himself, knowing what needed to be done next, always thinking ahead. He reminded Andre when they needed to order fertiliser, told him which fields needed draining, suggested different types of seed. He seemed to be aware of mechanical problems on the tractors before they developed and fixed them without comment, and had slipped effortlessly into the role of spokesman amongst the farm workers.

But Andre knew he couldn't refuse to let him go. And as for the four thousand ... well his mother Marta had worked in the kitchen for twenty years, and Sizwe might one day be as good as Kanyiso. I'll get the money back eventually, he thought.

"Okay," he said heavily. "I'll lend you the cash. I want it paid back in five years. Send me something every month as soon as you find a job, right? Or I'll start taking it off your mother's wages."

## *H*ELPFUL DEFINITIONS

**packet** — (British slang) a great deal of money.

**rands** — South African currency valued at approximately six to the dollar.

**Bloemfontein** — a city in South Africa.

He knew he wouldn't. If Kanyiso failed to pay, the note of his debt would join the other worthless bits of paper in his desk and he had no intention of mentioning any of these to his son.

"I'll give you back your money in three years, Mr. Becker. For certain."

The boy's self confidence was ridiculous.

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"So, how's Kanyiso getting on, Marta?" Andre stopped in the kitchen for some coffee, enjoying the smell of mutton stew.

"I don't know, *Baas*, he only write me one letter."

"Been three months now. I hope he's found something."

"He say he go to Johannesburg."

**FYI**

Johannesburg was notorious for its negative influence on the thousands of young African men who traveled there in the hopes of finding a better future. Instead, many of them were absorbed into a culture of drugs, gangs, violence, and early death.

"Really? What was wrong with Bloemfontein?"

"No jobs there, *baas*."

Andre didn't like to think of Kanyiso in Johannesburg, that murky black sponge of iniquity that sucked up country boys like him and spat them out, damaged and disillusioned. He'd probably be back on the farm before very long. Or dead.

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It had been a bad couple of years for *Wonderkloof*. The drought went on longer than any Andre could remember, and the mealie\* crop withered where it stood. The cattle came down with foot and mouth\* and the Arab stallion he'd imported with such high hopes proved to be infertile.

**mealie** — corn.

**foot and mouth** — a highly infectious viral disease affecting wild and domestic animals.

*Cite examples that highlight Becker's unusual character traits.*

*Why doesn't Andre intend to mention the IOU's to his son?*

*What previous information indicates that Kanyiso's self-confidence is not "ridiculous"?*

**HELPFUL DEFINITIONS**



"Dog food," sneered Nico. "Not worth his keep."

But he was a beautiful animal and Andre used him on the farm where the four-wheel pick-up couldn't go. One afternoon he was out riding to check on the fencing on the furthest corner of the farm when he came across the burial ground of the farm-hands, a spot he seldom visited.

Unkempt mounds and rickety wooden markers memorialized the passing of farm workers for the past eighty years, but standing amongst them like a glowing sentinel was the white marble headstone Kanyiso had bought for his father.

More handsome than the marker for Andre's own father, or his grandfather, who were both remembered with simple wooden markers. They were buried under the blue gums\* in the little iron-fenced family graveyard close to the farmhouse.

Thinking of Kanyiso again, he remembered the grubby envelopes stuffed with soft dirty banknotes that had started to arrive four months after the boy had left. Sometimes postmarked Johannesburg and sometimes Pretoria,\* and the final two from Zimbabwe.\*

Two years previously Marta had left the farm to live with her sister in Bloemfontein and her son Sizwe had gone with her. Although Andre fully expected the money to stop once they'd gone, it had continued regularly, with no note of explanation until the debt was paid in full.

These days he had no idea of where Kanyiso was or what he was doing. And he missed Sizwe, who had turned out to be almost as good a worker as Kanyiso.

He turned for home, skirting the lands. The sight of the burnt mealie stalks and the lifeless grey soil depressed him and he wondered how much longer they could go on without selling off some of the sheep.

A familiar dull ache started in his chest and he reached wearily for the digestion tablets\* he always carried, but as he did so a hot sharp pain lasered across his arm. Andre fell heavily from the saddle, hitting his head on a rock. When Nico finally came looking for him, he had been dead for hours.

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**H**ELPFUL  
DEFINITIONS

**blue gums** — eucalyptus trees.

**Pretoria** — the administrative capital of the Republic of South Africa.

**Zimbabwe** — formerly Rhodesia; now a republic to the north of South Africa.

**digestion tablets** — antacid pills.

Nico, now twenty-five and sole owner of *Wonderkloof*, was considered a good catch.

The Dominee\* had a serious word with Nico.

"It's time you settled down, my boy," he said.

"I had it in mind to ask Marie Louw to marry me, Dominee," he said.

"A good choice, my boy. Marie's a very devout girl. A nice family, the Louws."

Marie was delighted to be asked and after a big wedding and a reception in the garden of her father's farm she came to *Wonderkloof* as the wife of Nico Becker.

Three generations of Beckers had seen no reason to make changes to the solid old place, where the dark gloomy rooms were ringed with a wide verandah. Nico and his father had eaten all their meals out here, looking across the lands which stretched to the horizon on all sides.

Almost at once, Marie wanted certain improvements made to the farmhouse. For one so young and inexperienced, she was extremely forceful.

"You can't expect me to live like this," she stated, "The whole place is like something out of history. It's easy to see there were only men living here."

The kitchen with its black coal stove, the old pine dresser,\* and big scrubbed table in the centre weren't good enough. She demanded a fitted\* kitchen with wipe-down counters and an air extractor.\* She had the farm workers move the dark mahogany wardrobes to an outside store-room and had white wall units installed in the bedrooms, throwing out the worn candlewick\* bedcovers and buying ivory satin spreads. She bought a polished dining room table with stinkwood\* chairs and insisted they both sit and eat there three times a day.

**Dominee** — a South African clergyman.

**dresser** — here, a wide cabinet usually attached to the kitchen wall, with doors to cabinets above and below, used to store utensils; a counter in the middle serves as a work area with drawers below it.

**fitted** — here, built-in.

**air extractor** — an exhaust fan.

**candlewick** — a fabric onto which tufts of cotton wicking or thread are inserted in a consistent pattern by using a hooking device.

**stinkwood** — trees native to South Africa used for lumber and furniture; the wood emits an unpleasant odor when freshly cut.

*H*ELPFUL  
DEFINITIONS

If re-decorating the house kept her happy, Nico didn't mind. When Marie was not happy, or failed to get her own way, she developed paralysing headaches, which kept her on the bed with the curtains drawn until Nico apologised for whatever wrong he had done her. He realised very early in his marriage that it was more peaceful to give her whatever she wanted.

"I don't know how you and your Pa could have lived in this dump," she said, turning her attentions to the sitting room. "I can hardly bear to sit on these chairs, they're filthy."

"This lounge suite\* has always been here," he mumbled. "I think my Ma bought it when they got married."

"Yuck. All this old velveteen is full of holes and it's worn so thin in places I can push my finger through it."

Which she did, triumphantly.

"Let's got to town this weekend and buy a nice new lounge suite?" Marie sat on the arm of the despised chair and smiled pleadingly up at him. "A three piece, something plain maybe, and a new carpet. And we need to have this whole room painted, I was thinking a sort of mushroom colour?"

Marie's revamping of the farmhouse was eating a large hole in the wool cheque\* but Nico smiled and agreed to drive the two hundred kilometres to Bloemfontein, the only town in the Free State\* where a person could shop. Or so Marie said.

While she was spending money, he'd take the opportunity of speaking to people in the Land Bank about the worrying rumours he'd heard about the government land grabs. They weren't called land grabs, of course, that's what happened to the poor fellows in Zimbabwe. Over here they were more civilised, calling it "re-distribution of land."

He'd been told that nameless government officials drove around in big 4x4s, looked at the farms, and red-lined\* them on their survey maps. Once a farm had been red-lined, there was no appeal. You sold to the

*What do we learn about Marie's character?*

### **H**ELPFUL DEFINITIONS

**lounge suite** — a matched set of a couch and two armchairs.

**wool cheque** — the proceeds of the sale of the sheared wool.

**Free State** — a South African province, also called Orange Free State.

**red-lined** — the process by which a white-owned farm was confiscated and redistributed to a black farmer.

government, at the price they offered, no option. You moved out within three months, leaving generations of hard work and improvements behind: dams, buildings, fenced camps, and irrigation systems. Then a hundred families moved onto your land, people who claimed their grandparents had farmed there before the white man came.

Call it what you like, that's a land-grab even if they pay you for it, he fumed.\*

But it couldn't happen to *Wonderkloof*, the government wouldn't be so stupid. The properties in the area were commercially farmed with thousands of hectares\* producing bumper crops\* of mealies when the rains came, enough for the country's needs and more for export.

The conversation he had with his man at the Land Bank calmed Nico's fears.

"Never happen, not round here. Do the sums, man, you're producing a huge export tonnage annually. Put a hundred families on the place, each with a couple of acres and they'd grow just enough for themselves, if that. Simple economics, even this government can see it."

He drove back whistling under his breath, with Marie bubbling away in his ear about her purchases.

"So long as you're happy with everything," he said.

Within a few years, Marie had given Nico three sons, all large and healthy and looking set to follow their father in running the farm once they'd got school behind them. Danie, the eldest, could already drive the Massey Ferguson\* when he was twelve, shouting instructions to the men spading off fertiliser from the trailer behind him. Nico, sipping his coffee on the verandah, watched him with pride. A real little Becker, he thought. I wish Pa could see him.

He looked back into the old house and wondered what his father would make of the changes. Bright pale colours in every room and the latest furniture had transformed it into something as close to a glossy magazine spread as Marie could make it.

**fumed** — here, expressed irritation or anger.

**hectares** — units of land measure, each equivalent to 2,471 acres.

**bumper crops** — abundant crops.

**Massey Ferguson** — the brand name of a tractor.

*H*ELPFUL  
DEFINITIONS

The sitting room was Marie's favourite, one that only visitors were allowed to enjoy. The lounge suite in soft cream leather, and hand-woven curtains of cream wool, with pale mushroom walls and a matching carpet had given Marie the look of restrained luxury she wanted. All that was missing was the right coffee table.

"This old glass one isn't so nice any more, Nico, although the brass legs are still good," she said disconsolately. "I've looked at some wooden tables, but they're just not right. What I'd really like is white marble. Here, look." She thrust a magazine under his nose. "Wouldn't this be beautiful?"

"Don't be crazy," said Nico. "Do you know what marble costs?"

"It wouldn't cost us a cent! I know where we can get some, right here on the farm. In the graveyard."

Nico had a hollow feeling that he knew what was coming.

"Ag no, man, Marie. We couldn't," he said.

"We could," said Marie. "We'd just have to turn it upside down so no one could see the writing. I've measured it. It would fit exactly on top of those brass legs and be perfect."

"That's sacred stuff, you can't move a headstone. The men wouldn't do it."

"You could," said Marie. "Who'd notice? None of that family even live here any more."

In the end Nico and his two eldest sons dug out the headstone one night and carried it back in the pick-up. Marie scrubbed it clean with wire wool and scouring powder and the slim tablet of marble gleamed like new.

"Now turn it upside down and put it on the legs, carefully," she said. "I won't be able to move this table once it's in place."

Looking at the glacial white of the marble Nico thought he would have much preferred wood, but knew there was no point in saying so. Marie placed a woven blue mat on it with a vase full of silk flowers.

"Perfect," she said with satisfaction. "No one would ever guess it used to be a headstone."

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A year later Nico received an official notice, informing him that a representative of the Government would be call-

*What does  
the use of the words  
"glacial white"  
seem to foreshadow?*

ing in a fortnight to assess *Wonderkloof* for the purposes of reclaiming it in the name of the People.

He phoned his neighbours Hennie Venter and Paulus de Waal who had received the same buff\* envelope, and discussed what could be done.

"Actually, Nico, there's nothing we can do," said Hennie. "It says here they pay a fair market value. I'm sitting on forty thousand hectare here, they can't offer me peanuts. So I've decided to cash in without an argument and buy a place down on the South Coast anyway. Me and the wife can take it easy, the drought's been killing us this last couple of years."

"We're okay here, the borehole's\* still going strong," said Nico. "I'm not giving away my place without a fight. My grandfather farmed here, man."\*

"We might get lucky," said Paulus, "They might not red-line us at all. Wait until the fellow pitches up and see if he's open to — ah — suggestion."

"How much, d'you reckon?"

"Depends. A hundred thousand? Two fifty? These boys think big these days."

Nico hoped fifty thousand rands might do it.

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At the hour arranged, the powerful four-wheel drive braked in a flurry of dust and a tall black man stepped out, immaculate in a well-cut grey suit and carrying a shiny leather brief case.

Nico offered his hand politely.

"Morning," he said. "Nico Becker. I've been expecting you."

Not really. Most of these people kept African time and you'd be lucky if they came on the day they'd promised.

The man shook his hand briefly, without speaking, and looked around him.

"Nice place," he said.

"Yes," said Nico. "Of course, the drought's been bad. Not any mealies this year worth speaking of. Hardly any

**buff** — beige.

**borehole** — here, a well.

**man** — a commonly used familiar Afrikaans form of address.

*A buff-colored envelope indicates an official communication from the government.*

*What is Paulus implying?*

*What is clearly implied in the sentences, "Not really.... they'd promised"?*

*H*ELPFUL  
DEFINITIONS

*What is meant by the expression, "well-primed"? Why must Marie be "well-primed"?*

*How do we know that Nico plans to bribe the government representative?*

*What does Kanyiso imply about himself? What can the reader assume about him?*

*What further signs of Nico's personality become obvious?*

sunflower seeds. We're all suffering around here. Can I offer you a cup of tea?"

"Thank you."

Well primed, Marie came out smiling.

"You're in luck, I've just been baking," she said gaily. "Won't be a moment with the tea. Why don't you take our visitor through to the sitting room, Nico?"

They'd debated whether to entertain him on the verandah or inside the house and Nico had decided that if the envelope in his pocket were to change hands, it might be better to do so out of sight of any passing farm worker.

The man sat down and took out a notebook and pen. Then he unfolded a survey map of the area and spread it on the table. Nico strained to look but could see no red lines anywhere.

"Here we are!" Marie brought in the tray, laden with her best cups and slices of ginger loaf, and poured two cups of tea. "I think I'd better just leave you men to get on with it. Nice to meet you, Mr — er?"

"Zama," he smiled.

He waited until she'd left the room then said, "You don't remember me, Nico? Kanyiso Zama? I was brought up here. My father was Masipo — but you called him Kiepie, I think."

"Good lord!" Nico jumped up and pumped his hand. "Kanyiso! I didn't recognize you, man. You look so different."

"Well, it's been nearly twenty years since I left." His English was flawless, almost without an accent. "A lot of water under the bridge."

"You went off to Johannesburg, didn't you?"

"To start with. Then I was fortunate, they sent me to London. To study Economics."

Nico guessed "they" had been some faceless do-gooder interfering foreign-aid people.

"And now you're with the Government, eh? Land redistribution?"

"Yes. Not a very popular job, I'm afraid. With the present farmers, that is."

Nico grunted and bit his lip. He wasn't sure how to handle this. Kanyiso didn't look as if he'd be open to any suggestions involving money, but perhaps the memory of old times might sway him.

"I'm in this area for the whole week," continued Kanyiso. "I'm going on from here to Mr. de Waal's place next door. But I've been thinking about *Wonderkloof*..."

"Yes?" said Nico. "Almost no water in the boreholes these days. We're having it hard, man."

"Mmm. That's not what I've been told." He smiled briefly. "But your father was very good to me and to my family so I feel that as I am in a position to repay him, I should. Even if it is the next generation that will benefit. So you can relax, Nico, I probably won't be drawing a red line around *Wonderkloof*."

"That's good," mumbled Nico. Thank God for his old man and his soft heart.

"But we have our eye on the two neighbouring properties, they are very well suited to re-settlement."

He rose to go.

"Beautiful room," he said. "Of course, I never came inside the house when I lived here."

"No — well...things are different these days, I'm pleased to say," said Nico forcefully. "We're all equal now, eh?"

"Handsome table. Marble, is it?" He bent and ran his finger briefly over the smooth cold surface.

*Donder!*\* He'd completely forgotten the origins of the coffee table and an icy feeling in the pit of his stomach told Nico they should have stayed out on the verandah for tea. Kanyiso straightened up and looked at him without expression, but there was a sudden stillness about him.

"However, my decision is not set in stone," he said softly. "Before I make my final recommendation to the Committee, I'd like to pay my respects to my father. You may remember, we buried him here at *Wonderkloof*, on the hill."

*What contradiction is seen in Nico's remark? Why does he contradict himself?*

*Why didn't Kanyiso come "inside the house" when he lived there?*

*What is ironic in Kanyiso's remark about his decision?*



*Donder* — (Afrikaans) Thunderation!

*HELPFUL*  
*DEFINITIONS*

THE DEBT 355



16,076

**FW: Re: Binaminov** Inbox x

**Dovid Lerner/ Mirrer Yeshiva Mesivta**

to me

----- Original message -----

From: Rabbi Alstock <[historya.mirrer@gmail.com](mailto:historya.mirrer@gmail.com)>

Date: 5/22/20 3:21 PM (GMT-05:00)

To: [mirrerhs@thejnet.com](mailto:mirrerhs@thejnet.com)

Subject: Re: Binaminov

Week 1 grade 92.



On Thu, Apr 30, 2020 at 11:50 AM <[mirrerhs@thejnet.com](mailto:mirrerhs@thejnet.com)> wrote:

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