

THE BENCH BY RICHARD RIVE

SUMMARY 1

his life in a remote rural part of South Africa, this is his first visit to Cape Town, a bustling metropolis in which all sorts of people rub shoulders. More obviously than in his more segregated home town, Cape Town shows the tensions that result from the rigid system of separation of races known as apartheid. Karlie sees people of all colors—some black, some white, and others mixed.

As the story opens, Karlie is standing in a large crowd that is listening to a black speaker who is proclaiming the rights of black majority, the working class to whom he refers as the proletariat. Karlie is impressed by what the speaker is saying because it seems to be the first time that he has even considered the possibility that blacks do, in fact, have any rights at all. He notices that two white detectives are taking notes on everything that is being said at the meeting.

As Karlie listens, he recalls the advice he received from elders in his own community. Ou Klaas, for example, taught him that God created blacks and whites separately, and therefore they should continue to live separately.

On the platform with the speaker is a white woman in a blue dress and Nxeli, whom Karlie recognizes as a famous trade-union organizer. As he watches, the white woman gets up and begins speaking. She encourages the black crowd to refuse to play by the rules imposed by the whites: Blacks, she says, should sit wherever they please, and go wherever they want.

As he leaves the meeting, Karlie is both confused by the new ideas and exhilarated. He doubts whether anything of this sort could ever be put into action in his own little town, but he is beginning to think it might be a possibility. At the train station that will send him home he notices, in a new way, a bench labeled “Europeans only.” Inspired by all that he has heard and the sense of individual responsibility that the speakers have aroused in him, he decides to sit on the forbidden bench.

At first, no one seems to notice him. Time passes, and he thinks that his protest may go unheeded. After a while he eases into his new situation, and sits simply because he is tired. At that moment a young white man shouts at him to get up off the bench. Karlie neither speaks nor moves. As the white man continues shouting, a crowd gathers. Different people express different reactions. Some are outraged that Karlie will not sit on the benches reserved for blacks. Others declare that he should be allowed to sit wherever he wishes.

A police officer arrives and tells Karlie to move. Again, Karlie remains silent and stays where he is. As the officer begins shouting, the white woman who gave the speech Karlie heard approaches and defends Karlie’s rights. Nevertheless, the officer begins beating Karlie; he puts handcuffs on him and drags him away. At first Karlie struggles and tries to hold on to the bench; when he sees that this is hopeless, he stands up and goes with the officer, smiling and asserting the arrogance that he now feels.

SUMMARY 2

The Bench (1960)

Summary:

The Bench, by Richard Rive is a short story about a man called Karlie who is at some sort of demonstration against apartheid. The short story takes place in Johannesburg on a hot November day where Karlie is at a demonstration against apartheid. Karlie thinks that the words the speaker is speaking are great words, and he is listening very carefully to them. The speaker says that

“we must challenge the right of any people who see fit to segregate human beings solely on grounds of pigmentation”

Karlie thinks that the fact that he should be as good as any other white man requires much thinking and he wonders about what a man from his home town called Ou Klaas would say to this, because he says that God made the white man and the black man separately. Later on in the story a white woman asks the crowd to challenge any discriminatory laws on their way. When the demonstration is over, Karlie goes to the station where mixed races are walking around. Karlie thinks that people mistrust each other with an unnatural fear, and that people are suspicious to each other – Karlie remembers what the speaker had said about challenging these things, and when he sees a bench with “Europeans only” written on it he decides that this is going to be his challenge. Karlie sits down on the bench but nobody seems to notice. Suddenly, when Karlie is wrapped up in thinking of his home town, a man tells Karlie to get off the bench. Karlie does not get off the bench and even though the man keeps on shouting at him, he does not say anything. Karlie thinks that he is gaining some sort of supremacy towards the white man because the white man is afraid of taking action himself and the white man calls a police man. The policeman is also telling Karlie to get up but he does not get up. He just maintains his silence. After a little while people start pulling him and hitting him but he continues fighting but in the end he is arrested but he thinks that he has won the challenge and smiles.

Point of view:

The narrator is a third person narrator and it makes the effect that the story could be told by anyone, not just a single person.

Time and place:

The short story takes place in Johannesburg. In the beginning of the story it takes place on the Grand Parade but later on it takes place on the station. I think that the story spans over one day – because Karlie does not get home to sleep or anything during the story. I think that the text is a contemporary text because it is obvious that it takes place in a time where there is apartheid, which means that it probably takes place around 1960.

Character sketch of Karlie:

The main character is a brown man called Karlie, who is living in a town called Bietjiesvlei. The text does not say how old he is but I reckon that he is between 25-50 because he has children in school. When Karlie hears that the speaker says that Karlie is as good as a white man, he thinks that it needs much thinking. I think that this shows that Karlie has a split mind. On one hand he thinks that the speaker's words are true and great but on the other hand he thinks that the idea of him having the right to go to any bioscope, or eat in any restaurant or that his children could go to a white school is a dangerous idea.