

How is racism depicted in 'life for a life' by alan paton? essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



'Life for a Life' is a short story written by a famous white South African author who became involved in the fight against apartheid. It is a story about the murder of a rich white farmer and the revenge killing of a black shepherd. The story was written at the height of apartheid in 1962. Most of Alan Paton's work was written to express his views on the injustices in South Africa. His aim was to bring about change. Apartheid lasted from 1948 - 1991 and the story illustrates the division between the white and the black people.

In 'Life for a Life' the two races live totally different lifestyles. The whites live in big houses and the blacks live in small stonehouses which are very cramped and more like huts. Black people have no rights and very little freedom. The blacks are employed on the Kroon farm as shepherds, labourers and servants. They hate the whites and are afraid of them but are unable to stand up for themselves. They have to be polite and respectful even when provoked. They can not show their feelings of hatred. This is shown in the line:

... 'but as befitted people in their station, with salutes and deference.'

'Life for a Life' is written in the third person narrative. The author wants the reader to empathise with the black people, in particular Enoch and Sara Maarman. The tone of the language in the story conveys aggression and superiority on the part of the whites and inferiority and subservience on the part of the blacks. A good example of racism is when the white detective Robbertse insults Enoch Maarman:

' You creeping yellow Hotentot bastard'.

Also an example of subservience of the blacks is:

'.... because one had to speak the smiling craven words under any injustice..'

This is when Sara is feeling very angry about the way her husband was treated.

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Colour imagery is used throughout the story. Colour is important because the story is about black and white people. Black people are referred to as ' coloured', ' brown people' and ' dark, sun-warmed colour of the skin'.

' Yellow bastard' referred to Enoch Maarman as being a coward. An example of the use of colour imagery is:

'.... the big detective with the temper that got out of hand so that reddish foam would come out of his mouth....'

At the end of the story the imagery of ' the sun sinking over the hills of Kroon' is used a metaphor for all the manner of things that have been lost in the story.

The imagery of the valley and the river where Enoch Maarman is supposed to have slipped and died represent a barrier between the black and the white people.

The character that the reader finds most shocking in the story is Robbertse. Apart from being very racist he has a reputation for having a bad temper. Enoch and Sara Maarman feel threatened by Robbertse who at any time can change into a madman. As he interviews them his personality changes. One minute he is shouting and the next he ' suddenly grew intimate, confidential even friendly'. He is very unpredictable.

Robbertse is not really being friendly he is being cynical and tormenting Enoch. The hat incident shows the contempt Robbertse has for the Maarman's. When Robbertse enters the house he and the other detective keep their hats on therefore showing disrespect. However, a little later as Robbertse interrogates Enoch he removes his hat in such a way that Enoch thinks he is going to be hit and he falls to the ground:

' Why fall down' he asked ' because I take off my hat? I like to take my hat off in another mans house'.

The author keeps mentioning the hat to illustrate the point of disrespect and racism. It is in this conversation with Robbertse and the Maarmens that racism is most clearly depicted. Robbertse represents white superiority and the Maarmens represent the downtrodden black people.

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Soleman Koopman, Sara's brother behaves like a typical black man as he is always polite and respectful to the white policeman but he is a bit of a

coward. This is because he is afraid of losing his butcher's licence. An example of his attitude can be seen in the line:

'Soleman Koopman would have gone away, with a smile on his lips and cold hate in his heart'.

This shows that he did not want to upset the white policemen, but deep down he hated them. This is another area where racism is depicted.

Robbertse and the other white policemen are not worried about losing their jobs, but Soleman Koopman and the other black people are.

The writer develops Sara's character after her husband has been taken away. Her thoughts are full of anger when she thinks of the way that Robbertse treated her husband. This is shown in the line:

'..... hear the tremendous voice that filled her house, with feigned politeness, and with contempt and with cruel smiling'.

Towards the end of the story Sara stands up to the white policemen as she has nothing to lose. However, Koopman reminds her that she has to think of her son's future. This is shown in the line:

'I shall lose the licence, and who will help you to keep your son at the university?'

This shows that she still has responsibilities and that she should be careful. It is this pressure that they use to make her conform.

Racism is also depicted in the fact that Enoch Maarmen was allowed to disappear without any fuss and his widow was expected to just accept the situation and move from the farm. On the other hand, when Baas Flip was murdered the detectives immediately wanted to find the murderer.

This shows racism because the whites do not care about the blacks and do not consider them equal.

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'Life for a Life' is a very interesting and thought provoking story. It is a story that shows how both the white and black people suffer. The white people suffer because Baas Flip is brutally murdered and therefore the family suffers. The black people suffer as they are picked upon as it is assumed that a black person has committed the crime. Ultimately it is a story about black suffering and the cruelty black people faced at the hands of the whites.