

Ah, woe is me

Politics



In the beginning of this short story we are introduced to Sarah, an aging black servant living in South Africa. She works hard for an upper-class white family and spends all of her money on education for her three children who are sent to boarding school. They come home once a year at Christmas, and the first time the narrator meets the children, she is surprised at their well-mannered behaviour. She finds, however, that Sarah is a bit harsh towards them, and she comments on this. Sarah tells her that it is better to learn the lesson now and grow to accept one's fate later.

In the course of the following year, Sarah must give up her job because of her legs, and one day her daughter comes to the house. Slowly she tells her story to the narrator. How the younger brother is working now, and how she is taking care of Sarah. The narrator offers her some clothes and some money and invites her inside for a cup of tea. When she is about to leave, she starts crying and can only mutter that her mother is very ill. Unsure of what to do, the narrator hands her a handkerchief. The setting in this story is South Africa in the 1950s.

Apartheid and segregation are words that describe the conditions under which the blacks (the native Africans) live perfectly. The blacks nearly have no rights and must accept being oppressed by the whites. Sarah is only one of many poor blacks who only just manages to earn a living by working as a servant for a rich white family (the narrator). Slavery does not exist anymore, but it can be difficult to distinguish the life of a slave from that of a native African in the 50s except from the fact that they do after all get paid for their work.

Sarah is very concerned about her children getting a good education. She probably wants them to have a better life than she has had so far, and while that is a very noble thought, the facts speak against it. Her children do not at this time have a very good (if any) chance of getting a good solid education because it is very expensive, and their mother does not make that much money. Even if she did make enough money, her legs are bad, and at the end of the story, she has to give up her job (and thus take her children out of the boarding school) because she cannot afford to pay for the school.

This is what could look like the final blow to her children's future success in life. No education means no chances of getting a better life in South Africa (and just about everywhere else, too). But what if she did have enough money to give her children a proper education – would that guarantee the children a good future life I gravely doubt it. As I said before, the blacks live almost like slaves, and as such, they do not have the opportunity to climb the social ladder.

All in all, Sarah's hopes and dreams for her children are all very noble, but, unfortunately, at that time and place, very unrealistic. The narrator does not treat Sarah any better than most other white people in South Africa at this time. While she allows Sarah's children to stay in her house during Christmas, I think the only reason she does it is because she tries to escape her own bad conscience. It is Christmas after all. Throughout the rest of the year, she does not even think about helping Sarah's children financially so they can stay in school.

Even though she presumably has more money than Sarah will ever see, the thought of helping her servant out does not strike her at any point in the story. Her servant is her servant, and servants children are not someone she thinks about. This point is also very clear to see when one reads the description of the narrators thoughts about Sarahs children. She is surprised at how well they behave, how good their manners are; as if she was expecting a horde of wild animals instead of normal human beings.

She is undoubtedly not the only one to think this way about the blacks, they were considered animals by many white people at that time. However, the narrator seems to excuse her treatment and behaviour towards Sarah and her family with ignorance (see lines 99-103). I find it hard to believe that this ignorance really existed, but it is possible that it did, because the whites and the blacks were so distinctly segregated by the apartheid system. Yet I find it hard to believe that the narrator was completely unaware of Sarahs almost inhuman standard of living.

Surely, even though apartheid almost divided the whites and the blacks into two separate worlds, she must have known something about the conditions under which Sarah and her children lived, and that it was getting worse as the days went by (because of the mothers bad legs). When Janet, one of Sarahs two daughters, comes to visit the narrator in the end of the story, the narrator once again displays her ignorance about the blacks, but this time she openly admits it. Janet is, of course, in an unpleasant situation when she stands in the back yard of her mothers former employer.

Everyone has some pride in themselves, and standing in the back yard, asking for alms is, of course, very degrading to a proud person, no matter who that person is. Janet has probably tried being in a similar situation before, but now that her mother is unable to provide for the disintegrating family (her father has lost his job and her sister has married and moved away), the life and death of her family depends solely on her and her brother who are the only ones working. Janet is of course very depressed and sad, but she cannot give up now.

Her last hope is that the narrator will help her out, and, fortunately, she does. The handkerchief is actually the first thing the narrator has ever done to help Sarah's children. It is not until that point in the story Janet realizes just how bad things are with Sarah and her family. Of course, one could again be tempted to think that it was only her bad conscience that made her give Janet the clothes, but there is no way to be sure. I am, however, inclined to believe that the narrator has finally realized how immense the difference between the "black world" and the "white world" really is.

However, the things she gives Janet (some money and the handkerchief) will not last long, and what will Janet do then? Come back for more, of course. I am not saying that the narrator is doing something bad, but I do not think she realizes that Janet will probably come back again. It is like giving a stray cat some food; it will always come back for more. The question is if the narrator would give Janet more money if she came back, and if it would be any help at all. The first question is easy: Yes, she would give her more money if she came back - her conscience forbids her to do otherwise.

The second question is a bit more difficult to answer. Of course the money is an instant help to Janet and her family, but only a very insufficient one. The few dollars (or whatever currency they use in South Africa) she gives Janet will only provide the family with a meal or two, and after that they will be back to where they started, and would have to beg for more money. Now, I am not saying charity does not help, but I do not think it helps as much as many people would like to think it does. In many cases, it only puts off the sufferings.

The apartheid system has officially been abolished in South Africa today, but I think old habits die hard, so to speak. I am sure there are still blacks like Sarah and her family who have to subordinate to the richer white population even though – officially – apartheid does not exist there anymore. Societies do not change overnight, especially not when one group has to give up its right and privileges and share them with others (whom they dislike). Sarahs story is undoubtedly not the worst example one could find, but no one knows what happened after the scene in the narrators back yard.