

A WALK IN THE NIGHT

Notes for Viewing the Film

Before the Film . . .

Read the essay on [A Walk in the Night](#). Note that this film depicts a killing.

Although you don't need to know *Hamlet* to appreciate this film, it helps to recall a few facts about the play. After all La Guma took his title from Shakespeare's play and clearly conceives Mike as a tormented Hamlet figure. The film's title and the scene Uncle Doughty performs are from the play's first act, where Hamlet encounters his father's ghost on the battlements of Elsinore. His father tells him he is forced "to walk the night" and burn in fire all day to purge his sins. He tells Hamlet that he was murdered by his brother, Claudius, who poured poison in his ear and who has now ascended the throne and married his wife, Hamlet's mother, Gertrude. The ghost begs Hamlet to take revenge upon the usurper so that his soul can be at ease. Something indeed was "rotten in the state of Denmark," only here it's South Africa and the usurpers are the white settlers who have taken the land away from its indigenous owners. Uncle Doughty is also in some ways parallel to Hamlet's Uncle Claudius, even down to having had an affair with Mike's late mother. On the other hand, Mike's attack on Uncle Doughty sets nothing right and results only in the old man's unintentional death and that of Joey, the boy who Mike had tried to protect. Hamlet/Mike does not die heroically but has to live on with the consequences of his acts.

It may be useful to clarify the meaning of "Coloured" in South Africa's very elaborate former racial nomenclature. Viewers may notice that at the beginning of the film Mike is outraged that the white worker calls him a "kaffir," the South African equivalent of "nigger," not so much because he used a racial slur but an inaccurate one. In South Africa "kaffir" was generally applied to black South African descendants of the bantu-speaking people of the region. Coloured was a category referring to people of mixed race, specifically the products of mixing between the early Dutch settlers and the indigenous Khoikhoi or San people (and later with enslaved peoples from the East). Derogatorily known as Hottentots or Bushmen, Khoikhoi or San had actually been pushed back into the Western Cape by the Bantu migrations. The Coloured speak primarily Afrikaans and for hundreds of years have constituted a lower caste within Afrikaaner society. During the first presidential election with universal suffrage in 1994, the Western Cape province, where much of the Coloured population resides, actually voted for the Nationalist Party rather than for Nelson Mandela's ANC. These distinctions are downplayed in this film because as "grand apartheid" was implemented during the 1950s and '60s, the Coloured increasingly found

themselves subject to the repressive policies of forced removals, job restrictions, and disenfranchisement similar to that of black South Africans. Many Coloured played a vigorous role in the anti-apartheid movement.

Alex La Guma, the author of the story published in 1962 was an anti-apartheid activist from the Coloured community who died in exile in 1986. The original story was set in the 1950s in Cape Town's multi-racial District Six, which was ultimately razed by apartheid authorities. Although the protagonists are still from the Coloured community, the film version transports the story to post-apartheid Johannesburg.

*** The local library may have the book *A Walk in the Night and Other Stories* by Alex La Guma, Northwestern University Press, 1985.

After the film . . .

1. What are some of the various economic activities Dube highlights as Mike walks around the city after being fired? Why is his loss of a job at the steel mill such a blow and what alternative economic opportunities are open to him?
2. The problems of racism, crime and unemployment still exist in post-apartheid South Africa. Does the situation in South Africa's ghettos remind you of the inner cities of the United States as characterized by drug addiction, police brutality and gangs? What would you say the film shows as the underlying causes of these social ills?
3. This film is tightly plotted, occurring over a single evening and night and ending with the dawn of a new day. What are the incidents that contribute to Mike's growing rage? (His firing, police harassment, Joey's slide into prostitution, the unexpected pregnancy of Zelda, his beating at the hands of his fellow Coloureds, Uncle Doughty's drunken inability to perceive Mike's present desperate situation.)
4. Uncle Doughty does not feel he is a racist - which may in fact be true subjectively. But, even after having been married to a Coloured woman, he is still insensitive to the cumulative effect of the experience of racism on people like Mike. What does Doughty mean when he calls Mike "my boy" and says he is his "uncle?" Does "color blindness" inevitably mean ignoring the differences in experiences of racial groups? What to Uncle Doughty is just "force of habit," a "manner of speech," is for Mike the culmination of a night, a life of humiliation. Note that Mike's firing and Uncle Doughty's murder are both caused by a "racist" remark. Do you think Mike would have taken exception to being called "my boy" by Uncle Doughty if he had not already been treated as one by the cop and his boss?

5. Imagine you were the jury, what sentence would you pass on Mike - murder, manslaughter, innocent, temporary insanity? If Mike were put on trial for the murder of Uncle Doughty, his lawyer might use the so-called "black rage" defense: that Mike's action is excused by a lifetime of racial oppression. What responsibility, if any, do you think Mike has for his acts? How does his culpability compare to that of Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son*?

6. Do you think it credible that the young cop would kill the older one? (This incident doesn't occur in La Guma's original 1962 version) Why do you suspect Dube includes it here? Is Dube suggesting there are options available to South Africans, black and white, today that were not available when La Guma wrote this story? What does the crowd then do to the young cop; do they treat him as an individual or the member of a racial group? What is the significance of the last shot in the film, a group of people walking into the dawn?

7. How does this film differ stylistically from the other titles we've screened? Does it remind you more of American television and dramas? (The director, Mickey Dube, after all, studied filmmaking in the U.S. unlike any of the other directors in this series.)

Country facts in brief:

SOUTH AFRICA

Location: Southern Africa, at the southern tip of the continent of Africa

Capital: Pretoria (administrative); Cape Town (legislative); Blomfontein (judicial)

Majority rule: April 1994

Population: 42,834,520 (1998)

Ethnic groups: black 75 % (Ndebele, Pedi, Sotho, Swazi, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa, Zulu), white 13% ,Coloured 9% (mixed race), Asian 3% (Indian, Malaysian)

Languages: 11 official languages; Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Sesotho sa Leboa, Sesotho, siSwazi, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa, Zulu

Economy/Labor: services 35%, agriculture 30%, industry 20%, mining 9%, (world's largest producer of platinum, gold, chromium), other 6%

GDP per capita: \$6200 (1997)