

Lesson 28

Rive's "No Room at Solitaire"

Objectives

- To analyze the story's allusions and ironies
- To formulate its central theme

Notes to the Teacher

Richard Rive's "No Room at Solitaire" uses a literary allusion as the basis for a satirical comment on racial discrimination. Rive (b. 1931) is a South African novelist, short story writer, and playwright. His lectures have drawn audiences in Africa, Europe, and the United States. Many of his writings comment on the effect of the South African racial policy known as apartheid, which attempted to separate black South African citizens from white ones by strictly limiting their movements and job opportunities. Although apartheid policies were officially repealed in the 1990s, the country is still trying to heal its divided populace.

"No Room at Solitaire" is set on Christmas Eve at an establishment that is anything but full. Two characters drink and chat rather idly about whether they will recognize "Him" when he comes again. A black couple, the woman pregnant and ill, arrives seeking shelter and is rejected. A servant clandestinely puts them in the stable. As the story concludes, the two drinkers check the sky for a single bright star.

"No Room at Solitaire" appears in *Quartet: New Voices from South Africa*, ed. Richard Rive (London: Heinemann, 1963). This book includes sixteen stories by South African writers, including Alex la Guma, James Matthews, Richard Rive, and Alf Wannenburgh.

Procedure

1. Have the class read "No Room at Solitaire" aloud. To ease the process, agree on simple pronunciations of names.
2. Have students complete part A of **Handout 45**.

Suggested Responses:

1. *The story is set on Christmas Eve and alludes repeatedly to the New Testament story of the birth of Jesus.*

2. *The characters see a rigid distinction between blacks and whites.*
3. *During an argument Fanie insisted that a black had been educated beyond a specific standard; because of this affront, Oom Sarel did not invite Fanie to his Christmas Eve celebration.*
4. *He worries that he will not recognize Jesus when he comes again.*
5. *When Fanie realizes they are black, he rescinds the invitation and orders them to be sent away.*
6. *Fanie's insistence that there is no room reminds Dawie of the same theme in the nativity story; he laughs both at the parallel phrasing and in nervousness.*
7. *Half-convinced that this is the second coming of Jesus, they look for the star that long ago led sages to Jesus' birthplace. The scene is humorous and, at the same time, ominous.*
8. *Local color devices include characters' names, exclamations, and details about Oom Sarel's party. It distances American readers from the main characters, who seem humorous.*
9. *Fanie has been ostracized from the group because of his open support for the idea that blacks can be highly educated; he seems a liberal. However, his actions on Christmas Eve reveal that he is just as bigoted as the others. Dawie worries about missing Jesus when he comes again—and perhaps he has missed that event. The story is about people who celebrate Christmas but reject the Christmas message.*
10. *The characters evoke amusement, condescension, and some anger.*
11. *Rive deals with human hypocrisy and blindness.*
12. *Although set on a religious holiday, "No Room at Solitaire" is not so much a religious story as a political one. It is less concerned with religious faith than with social/racial equality.*

3. Have small groups complete part B of **Handout 45**. Then invite the groups to share creative responses.

Suggested Responses:

The handout provides three sample topics. The first criticizes society's tendency to ostracize and brand people who follow a different drummer. The second suggests the importance of practicing what we preach. The third points the finger at a society that makes King a hero and yet remains racist.

Optional Activity

Have students read the biblical narrative of the birth of Jesus. Assign an essay that compares and contrasts that narrative to Rive's "No Room at Solitaire."

Allusion and Irony in a South African Story

Part A.

Directions: Read Richard Rive's "No Room at Solitaire" and consider the following points.

1. What literary allusion forms the basis for the entire story?
2. Describe the characters' observations about class distinctions.
3. Why is Fanie van der Merwe virtually alone on Christmas Eve?
4. What question troubles Dawie Volkwyn?
5. When the servant first mentions the man and woman, Fanie invites them to enter. Abruptly, he changes his mind. Why?
6. What prompts Dawie's hysterical giggle near the end?
7. Describe the tone and meaning of the concluding paragraph.
8. How does the story incorporate local color? What is its effect?
9. Identify the story's ironies.
10. How are readers likely to respond to Fanie and Dawie?
11. Identify the story's central theme(s).
12. Is this a religious story? How does Rive use the allusion?

Part B.

Directions: Richard Rive uses a literary allusion as an ironic basis for the story “No Room at Solitaire.” Select another literary allusion and plan a way to use it in a story imitating Rive’s approach. There are examples to guide you below.

Basic allusion

Examples

The townspeople’s angry denunciation of Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*

The Declaration of Independence

Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech

Ironic context

Examples

Discussion of *The Scarlet Letter* in a class that has ostracized someone

A social studies class run by an autocratic teacher

An all-white school on Martin Luther King Day

Concluding episode

Examples

The ostracized person dons an elaborate symbol.

The class rises in revolution.

A black man continues to clean floors in an otherwise empty building.

Fictional purpose

What change does the proposed story suggest or demand?