

# The Train Driver



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ATHOL FUGARD

Athol Fugard is widely considered South Africa's greatest playwright, and his works are influential and popular throughout the world. He was born in 1932 to a bilingual family: his father was a native English speaker, and his mother spoke Afrikaans. Fugard's father, a jazz pianist, struggled with disability and alcoholism that impeded his ability to work, so Fugard's mother supported the family by operating a boarding house and tea shop. These elements of Fugard's life appear in one of his most popular plays, "*Master Harold*"... *and the Boys*. Fugard studied philosophy at the University of Cape Town, but he left before graduation to travel. After two years, Fugard returned to Cape Town, where he joined a theatrical community and began writing plays. When Fugard took employment at the Native Commissioner's Court, he became familiar with the oppressive practices of apartheid. He began to argue explicitly against racism and apartheid in his plays, which prompted the South African government to surveil him and his family. After his play *The Blood Knot* (1961) was banned in South Africa, performances moved to the United States, where Fugard gained an American audience. Fugard continued to write plays as he explored the genres of prose and film, and in 2011 he was awarded a Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From 1948 to the early 1990s, South Africa was governed by apartheid, a policy of racial segregation that oppressed the nation's Black and nonwhite majority and reserved basic rights only for the white population. Activist groups such as the African National Congress (ANC) fought against apartheid's institutional racism. Many of these activists were imprisoned, including Nelson Mandela, who later became South Africa's first Black president. He was elected in 1994, three years after South Africa repealed the Population Registration Act, which had established the racial categories that upheld apartheid. Though the formal, institutional racism of apartheid came to an end, South Africa still struggled with the remnants of segregated systems. *The Train Driver* examines these post-apartheid racial divisions.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of Fugard's other works deal with themes of racism in South Africa. Like *The Train Driver*, the play *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* (which Fugard co-wrote with actors Winston Ntshona and John Kani) argues against hierarchies of race and class and explores themes of identity through the characters'

relationships to their names. Kwame Alexander's 2014 novel *The Crossover* also analyzes identity through a lens of nicknames and language. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977) examines the role of European languages as an oppressive force in Africa (specifically in Kenya), which provides a deeper insight into the racialized language barrier between Roelf and Simon in *The Train Driver*. Another work interested in similar aspects of racism as *The Train Driver* is *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, by James Weldon Johnson (1912), which focuses on racism in America rather than South Africa. The novel shines a light on racism and racial divides in America shortly after the end of slavery, mirroring *The Train Driver's* argument that abolishing official institutions of racism does not end systemic racial prejudice on a societal level. Trevor Noah's 2016 memoir *Born a Crime* is another piece of literature that examines the effects of racism and wealth inequality both before and after the end of apartheid.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Train Driver
- **When Written:** 2009–2010
- **Where Written:** Cape Town, South Africa
- **When Published:** First performed in March 2010
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Play
- **Setting:** The graveyard of a South African squatter camp
- **Climax:** Roelf resolves to find closure by digging a grave for Red Doek.
- **Antagonist:** Despair, racial divisions, and prejudice

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Based on True Events.** *The Train Driver* was inspired by the true story of a mother who committed suicide with her three children on the train tracks outside of Cape Town.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Simon Hanabe, a Black Xhosa gravedigger, tells the audience about the time a white man came to the graveyard of **unmarked graves** in search of a dead woman. As the play flashes back to that scene, Roelf Visagie wanders through the graveyard of the Shukuma squatter camp. He is looking for the body of a woman he calls Red Doek because of the red *doek* (headscarf) she wore. Roelf tells Simon that he wants to curse at Red Doek for ruining his life, but Simon warns Roelf that he should leave. The *amagintsa* (gangs) will react violently if they

see a white man encroaching on their territory. When Roelf refuses to leave, Simon brings him to his own shack. Roelf reveals that he ran over Red Doek and her baby with a train when Red Doek stepped onto the tracks, and since then Roelf has been haunted by her memory. He has decided that the only way to banish her ghost is to swear at her so violently that she regrets bringing him into her suicide. However, Roelf doesn't know Red Doek's name, and no administrative officials could identify her, so after a long search he has come to Simon's graveyard, where the nameless bodies go.

Roelf and Simon survey the graves, but Simon cannot remember where he buried Red Doek and her baby. Roelf is horrified that the graves are marked with pieces of trash rather than crosses, and Simon explains he only marks them to prevent him from digging in the same place twice. Roelf becomes concerned about respecting the dead, and he realizes that Black and white people all end up as food for worms.

Roelf and Simon bond as they discuss their childhoods and share a meal. Roelf reveals that he no longer wants to swear at Red Doek. He spoke to many poor Black people in *pondoks* (huts) while he searched for Red Doek, and witnessing their poverty and the unmarked graves has made Roelf sympathetic to the hopeless life Red Doek and her baby must have lived. Roelf walks among the graves to speak to Red Doek's ghost. He reflects on white people's ignorance of the lives of Black people, and he says that his connection to Red Doek has helped him move past that ignorance. He refuses to let Red Doek go on unclaimed and unnamed, so he claims her.

Later, Simon and Roelf share a **loaf of bread** with jam and discuss the sweets they ate as children. Roelf wants to go home, but Red Doek holds him back. He obsesses over the fact that he was the last human being Red Doek saw, and in her final moments, she truly did see him. Roelf wishes that he could have buried Red Doek himself, and Simon suggests that when Mr. Mdoda, the undertaker, brings the next body, Roelf can imagine the corpse is Red Doek and dig the grave. Roelf agrees. When Simon goes to sleep, Roelf leaves the shack and starts to dig a grave.

Simon addresses the audience again and explains that while Roelf digs, the *amagintsa* shoot and bury him. The next day, Mr. Mdoda and Simon dig up Roelf's naked body. Mr. Mdoda fetches the police, who suspect Simon of the murder, but Mr. Mdoda defends him. On Mr. Mdoda's advice, Simon pretends that he has never met Roelf before. The police confiscate Simon's bloodstained spade, and Mr. Mdoda fires him for the trouble he has caused. Simon stands empty-handed and helpless. He tells the audience that now he has no job and no spade.



## CHARACTERS

**Roelf Visagie** – Roelf Visagie is a white Afrikaans train driver whose train kills a young Black woman (Red Doek) and her baby. Her death fills him with guilt, grief, and anger, and he spirals into a deep depression that leads him in search of Red Doek's corpse. As Roelf visits the town of *pondoks* (huts) where Red Doek lived, he begins to develop empathy for South African Blacks, which grows when he goes to the graveyard where Simon, the gravedigger, buried Red Doek and her baby in an **unmarked grave**. Simon cares for Roelf as Roelf grapples with his emotional turmoil, and the two men form a meaningful bond that challenges Roelf's prejudices about Black people. Simon suggests that Roelf dig a grave for the next unidentified body and imagine the grave is for Red Doek, and Roelf is so desperate for closure that he accepts the idea. Despite Simon constantly warning him of the risk for a white man in the graveyard after dark, Roelf's fixation on Red Doek has developed into a single-minded obsession, so he digs through the night. His recklessness eventually gets him killed by the local *amagintsa* (gang). His killers bury Roelf in the same hole he was digging for Red Doek.

**Simon Hanabe** – Simon Hanabe is an elderly Black gravedigger who works in the graveyard of the squatter camp Shukuma, burying unidentified bodies in **unnamed graves**. Simon is less introspective and more practical than Roelf, but he understands the importance of Roelf's search for closure regarding Red Doek, so he tries to help. Along the way, Simon's generosity and willingness to discuss his childhood teach Roelf about the differences between the lives of Black and white South Africans. Simon was born "Andile," but when he left his home in Hluleka to come to Port Elizabeth, he changed his name, which speaks to the relationship between names and identity explored throughout the play. Simon's happy childhood provides a contrast to the hopelessness of Red Doek's life. Simon grew up in similar circumstances to Red Doek, but he had a loving family to support him and was able to find steady employment. However, being a member of marginalized groups does render Simon's contentment precarious, as the police and Mr. Mdoda easily rob Simon of his livelihood at the end of the play, leaving him just as helpless and hopeless as Red Doek.

**Red Doek (The Woman)** – Red Doek is a young Black woman who kills herself and her baby by stepping onto the train tracks in front of Roelf's train. Her death haunts Roelf, and he grows increasingly troubled as he fails to learn anything about who she was as a person. He calls her "Red Doek" because she wore a red *doek* (headscarf) on the tracks, but her body is never identified, leaving her nameless throughout the play. As Roelf learns more about the potential circumstances of Red Doek's life, he realizes that her abject poverty robbed her of any hope for her life or her baby's life. Roelf's growing empathy for and connection with Red Doek helps him grow past his racial biases.

**Mr. Mdoda** – Mr. Mdoda is Simon’s employer, the undertaker who manages unidentified bodies. He sends Roelf to the graveyard of Shukuma in search of Red Doek. At the end of the play, Mr. Mdoda is frustrated that Simon has allowed a white man to die in the graveyard, but he defends Simon to the police when they accuse Simon of Roelf’s murder. Mr. Mdoda’s protection ends there, however, since he proceeds to fire Simon for the trouble he has caused.

**Lorraine Visagie (Roelf’s Wife)** – Lorraine is Roelf’s wife. She exemplifies the racist prejudices of white middle-class South Africans, blaming Red Doek’s death on the drunkenness she associates with all Black people. She is preoccupied with cleanliness and order, and she complains that Roelf’s obsession with Red Doek has brought Red Doek’s “stink” into the house. Lorraine is unsympathetic to Roelf’s trauma, but her angry suggestion that Roelf swear at Red Doek instead of his family inspires Roelf to find Red Doek’s body.

that shaped him and Red Doek. Personal human connection is thus depicted as a crucial way to combat prejudice—and yet Roelf’s revelations die with him at the end of the play, hinting that these instances of connection are rare and, on a larger scale, ineffective in bringing about change.

However, *The Train Driver* does not claim that ending racism is as simple as forming friendships. The *amagintsa* (local criminals) kill Roelf because he is a white man encroaching on their territory, and the Black police officer who speaks to Simon at the end of the play is upset that Simon allowed a white man to “mess with our people.” The play’s conclusion suggests that though moments of connection are instrumental in ending the racial prejudices of individuals, they cannot dismantle the institutional divisions between white and Black South Africans.



## LANGUAGE

Over the course of Roelf’s stay at Simon’s shack, the men gradually start to use words from each other’s languages: Simon starts saying “ja” instead of “ewe,” and Roelf echoes Xhosa phrases used by Simon. The intertwining of their languages highlights the characters’ desire to communicate and connect with each other in spite of the societal factors that divide them. The play also explores language through the power of vulgarities. Roelf swears throughout the play, and his initial goal is to find Red Doek so he can “swear at her properly.” Roelf resents Red Doek for bringing about a traumatic moment in his life, and he believes that he can put his mind at rest by enacting vengeance against Red Doek. The fact that his imagined vengeance takes the form of swearing highlights that verbal violence can be as impactful as physical violence. However, Roelf does not find closure through language: he eventually decides *not* to swear at Red Doek, and Simon persuades him to speak to her spirit instead. Roelf tries to follow Simon’s advice, and his monologue to Red Doek’s ghost seems to help him—and yet before Roelf can truly resolve his anguish, he is killed by the very physical violence of the *amagintsa*. The failure of language here highlights the limits of its power. Language can facilitate both connection and aggression, but in the context of racial strife, that capability can be overpowered by deadly violence.



## HELPLESSNESS VS. AGENCY

The events of *The Train Driver* stem from a moment in which a formerly helpless woman assumes agency over her life, and a formerly autonomous man becomes helpless to stop her. Red Doek has lived a life without power or hope, so she asserts her agency by ending that life. Her suicide brings in Roelf as an unwilling participant, and his loss of agency in this moment destabilizes him for the entirety of the play. By forcing a previously privileged man to grapple with an abrupt loss of agency, *The Train Driver* highlights



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## RACE AND EMPATHY

*The Train Driver* follows a white Afrikaans man, Roelf Visagie, searching for the corpse of an unnamed Black woman, a journey that leads him to reevaluate his understanding of race. Roelf was driving a train that ran over the Black woman and her baby and has been burdened with guilt ever since the accident. Roelf’s wife resorts to racial stereotypes to comfort him, reassuring Roelf that the woman was probably drunk and high on marijuana. These casual remarks highlight the prevalence of racism in white South African society. But his wife’s assurances aren’t enough, and Roelf undertakes a desperate search for closure. In the process of searching for the woman’s identity, Roelf comes to realize that white people believe they “know everything” about Black people, but in reality, they are blinded by ignorance and prejudice. When Roelf’s search for the dead woman (whom he refers to as Red Doek because of the headcovering she wore) leads him to enter a poor Black village, he interacts with Red Doek’s neighbors and forms a close bond with the Black gravedigger Simon Hanabe. Simon even feeds and houses Roelf as Roelf grapples with his desire to find Red Doek’s body. Simon often splits **loaves of bread** down the middle to share with Roelf, which calls attention to the shared human needs between these two very different men. Over the course of the play, Roelf develops empathy for Simon and the communities

the helplessness of the underprivileged and the way that helplessness diminishes society as a whole.

The audience is introduced to Roelf as he “helplessly” searches the **unmarked graves** for Red Doek. He remains in this sort of stasis, trapped in the same unfruitful action, until Simon intervenes. Simon guides Roelf throughout the play: he offers food, lodging, and advice. Talking to Simon helps Roelf realize that he no longer wants to curse at Red Doek, but he doesn’t know what he *does* want until Simon suggests talking to Red Doek’s spirit. Roelf’s perpetual helplessness was triggered by the moment on the train tracks; the newspaper article about Red Doek’s death describes Roelf “look[ing] on helplessly.” Roelf accepts that he was helpless to stop the collision, but that doesn’t mean that he lacks responsibility for it. This tension between his perceived helplessness and culpability is at the crux of Roelf’s internal conflict, and it speaks to the inherent trauma of being rendered helpless. Even when Roelf finally takes action toward his goal of emotional resolution, he is killed. Roelf’s death, in turn, leads to Simon’s loss of agency, as the police confiscate Simon’s spade and Mr. Mdoda terminates Simon’s employment. Simon is at the mercy of the systems that disenfranchise him, so he has no means to protest as his livelihood is taken from him. He ends the play with a “helpless gesture” toward the audience, emphasizing his dire position and forcing the audience to acknowledge their own complicity in a racist society that perpetuates this helplessness.



## NAMES

*The Train Driver* takes place in South Africa, which recognizes 11 official languages. Roelf is a native Afrikaans speaker, and Simon’s first language is

Xhosa. The two communicate in English, though each man peppers phrases of his own language into the dialogue. Roelf appears to be more fluent in English than Simon is, and he emphasizes more than once that he is “fully bilingual.” However, he does not know Simon’s language, and he often fails to understand what Simon has said to him. As a bond forms between the two men, they begin to bridge the language barrier. *The Train Driver*, like most plays, is driven by dialogue. Spoken language becomes the primary method by which the characters relate to each other, themselves, and the world around them. In this way, language is established as a powerful tool for connection (through communication) and violence (through swearing).

*The Train Driver* takes place in a graveyard of **unmarked graves**, which immediately underscores the significance of names and the tragedy of namelessness. Names are tied to identity throughout the play, and the unique naming conventions of each character exemplify how names are at once an expression of identity and a reflection of how identity develops. Though she is a central figure in the plot, neither the other characters nor the audience ever learn Red Doek’s name. The head

covering she wore, and the fact that she died, are the only things that identify her. On the other hand, Simon has two names: Andile, the name he was born with, and Simon, his “whiteman’s name.” His transition to a new name highlights how names are intrinsic to identity. When Simon left his family in Hluleka, he created a new identity to survive in his new, predominantly white environment, and he marked that new identity with a new name. Renaming also appears when Simon nicknames Roelf “Roelfie” and “Roofie.” These nicknames call attention to the developing friendship between the two men. These name changes and nicknames demonstrate how names are not only identifiers of an individual, but they also represent how that individual relates to the people around them over the course of one’s life.



## HOPE VS. DESPAIR

The inciting incident of *The Train Driver* is the suicide of Red Doek, the culmination of a lifetime of despair and hopelessness. Roelf could see the lack of hope in her eyes when she stood on the track, and he later tells Simon his belief that Red Doek’s despair rendered her not only ready for death, but to some extent already dead. By explicitly linking despair to death, the play implicitly links hope to life, thus asserting that hope makes life worth living. Anyone who faces a lack of hope as abject and absolute as Red Doek’s, then, is at risk of succumbing to her level of despair. As Roelf learns more about Red Doek, he comes to understand the extent of her hopelessness. He visits the town of pondoks (huts) where she lived, and he witnesses how poverty dehumanizes those it affects, forcing the residents of pondoks to “live like animals.” Roelf is horrified to realize that a young mother and her baby lived in such “hopeless” conditions. Her suicide begins to make sense to him, and he realizes that if his circumstances were as hopeless as Red Doek’s, he would likely fall victim to the same despair and similarly seek to end his life. Roelf himself grapples with despair throughout the play as he loses hope of finding Red Doek’s body. This despair ultimately leads him to forsake his own safety in a final attempt at closure, as gang members murder Roelf while he digs a symbolic grave for Red Doek.

All three main characters of *The Train Driver* lack hope. Red Doek’s despair led her to take her own life, while Simon and Roelf’s versions of hopelessness are less immediate but no less destructive. Simon’s lack of hope manifests as resignation to the bleak conditions of his life. Roelf, meanwhile, repeatedly tries and fails to conjure hope in his own emotional recovery. Through this pervasive lack of hope, *The Train Driver* suggests that South African society is systemically opposed to progress. Though apartheid is over, society still imposes hierarchies based on race and class that rob people of the ability to imagine and hope for better lives.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## UNMARKED GRAVES

*The Train Driver* is set in a graveyard of unmarked graves, which symbolize the lack of respect and individual identity granted to the impoverished Black people buried there. Simon, the gravedigger, refers to the unidentified bodies in the graveyard as “the ones without names,” and the anonymity of the bodies buried in the graveyard is portrayed as a tragedy in and of itself. Throughout the play, names are tied to identity, and the namelessness of the dead robs them of identity and personhood. Roelf agonizes over not knowing Red Doek’s name, since he believes that knowledge will allow him to learn about the woman he killed, but his wish is never granted and Red Doek remains anonymous. Roelf visits her town and speaks to the police, but no one can tell him Red Doek’s name because no one claimed her body. Roelf is horrified to realize that Red Doek endured an entire life of suffering, and now that her life is over, her “big happy ending” is that nobody wants her. In this way, Red Doek represents dozens of ignored, unwanted bodies buried in unmarked graves. Their lives were dominated by oppression and despair, and now, those same forces act upon them in death.

Not only do the graves not identify who is buried within them, they are not marked as graves at all. Simon leaves pieces of garbage on the graves, a gesture that Roelf initially misinterprets as a sign of respect. In reality, Simon leaves trash on the graves simply to remind him not to dig in those spots again. Roelf believes that the graves should be marked with crosses as a sign of respect, but Simon points out that the sticks used to make a cross would be stolen for fires. This point highlights that poverty prevents the living from properly mourning their dead, as gestures of respect lose importance when compared to practical acts of survival. The forces of oppression that marginalize poor Black South Africans strip the dead of their personhood and stop the living from bestowing respect on those they have lost.



## LOAVES OF BREAD

During Roelf’s stay in Simon’s shack, the two men share multiple loaves of bread, which represent their growing connection and the basic human experiences that supersede racial barriers. The recurring instances of splitting a loaf of bread call to mind the notion of “breaking bread,” an idiom that describes how people can establish a meaningful connection over a meal. In *The Train Driver*, Simon literally “breaks” his bread to share with Roelf, and he splits the loaf

exactly in half so he and Roelf can share it equally. This act deconstructs some of the societal hierarchies each man occupies, positioning them instead as equals. The last time Roelf and Simon share bread, they sweeten it with apricot jam, which prompts both characters to share their favorite sweeteners from childhood: Roelf liked name-brand syrup, while Simon holds fond memories of gathering wild honey with his father. Their lives have been differently shaped by race and class, but at their core both men are just that—men. They share the same human need for nourishment and the enjoyment of sweets, even if their access to those things is dictated by the presence or absence of privilege. *The Train Driver* makes clear that racism is a huge, infrastructural problem that cannot be fixed by individual moments of connection. However, those connections are still important, and moments such as sharing bread speak to the fundamental humanness of all people, which racism seeks to deny.



## QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Theatre Communications Group edition of *The Train Driver and Other Plays* published in 2012.

## Prologue Quotes

●● SIMON: My name is Simon Hanabe, I am the one who puts the nameless ones in the grave. This is how it happened. When I first see the whiteman...he is walking among the amangcwaba where the ones with names is sleeping... Then he sees me watching him and he comes to me and starts talking but that time I didn't know what he was saying--his words were all mixed up like he was drunk. So he gets very cross with me when I shake my head and tell him I don't know what he is saying.

**Related Characters:** Simon Hanabe (speaker), Roelf Visagie

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 7

## Explanation and Analysis

Simon’s opening monologue to the audience subtly lays the foundation for many of the play’s themes. He introduces himself by name, which contrasts with his description of “the nameless ones.” This beginning establishes how names are intrinsic to identity--Simon’s name is the first thing he tells the audience, and it is what distinguishes him from the nameless bodies in the graveyard. His description of Roelf as “the whiteman” also establishes the racial divide that

characterizes the play's setting. As a white man, Roelf is out of place in a Black graveyard. Additionally, Simon refers to the graves by the Xhosa word *amangcwaba*, situating the audience in the multilingualism of the play's dialogue. The importance of language is also emphasized by the misunderstanding between Roelf and Simon. Their interaction begins with Roelf's words getting "all mixed up," highlighting both Roelf's fragile mental state and the significance of language as a way to connect with others. Roelf's words fail to convey their meaning to Simon, and that failure renders Simon confused and Roelf frustrated.

illustrates that Simon is more practical than the emotional, agitated Roelf. Simon's assertion that "there is no flowers in Shukuma" also establishes the pervasive poverty and destitution that affects Shukuma, to the extent that even simple pleasures like flowers are denied to its residents. Roelf ignores the implications of this and stays within the bounds of his own ignorance, moving on to accuse "you people" (Black people as a group) of neglecting the religion he assumes they believe in.



## Scene 1 Quotes


☞ ROELF: Fucking hell! What a miserable bloody ending to your life's story. I wouldn't even bury my dog like this, man! (*Goes to one grave and picks up an old motorcar hubcap*) And this rubbish on the graves? What the hell is this idea?...You put these here?

SIMON: Ewe. There is no flowers in Shukuma.

ROELF: I see! So that is what it's supposed to be...respect for the dead! Then why not just a simple cross, man?...Remember Jesus? You people are supposed to believe in God and Jesus, isn't that so?

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie, Simon Hanabe (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 10

### Explanation and Analysis


As Roelf forms his first impression of Shukuma's graveyard, he is horrified by what he sees. He fails to understand what factors might have prevented the residents of Shukuma from burying their dead in a more conventional fashion, and his ignorance quickly turns to anger. He lambasts the graveyard with aggressive, vulgar language, which seems to contradict his own professed belief in respecting the dead. Roelf recognizes that a nameless grave covered in trash is "a miserable bloody ending to your life's story," but instead of extending sympathy to the dead, he rages at the living. This indicates how, on a broader level, Roelf would rather blame individuals for their actions within oppressive systems than examine those systems themselves or try to empathize with victims of oppression.

Simon responds to Roelf's comments with simple logic, instead of challenging Roelf's ideology as a whole, which

☞ ROELF: (*with vicious deliberation*) Ja. Give me her name...or show me her grave...and I will do it. S'trues God. In both official languages because I am fully bilingual...I'll do it so that her ghost can hear me. I'll tell her how she has fucked up my life...the selfish black bitch...that I am sitting here with my arse in the dirt because thanks to her I am losing everything...my home, my family, my job...my bloody mind! Ja! Another fucking day like this one and I won't know who I am anymore or what the fuck I am doing!

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie (speaker), Simon Hanabe, Red Doek (The Woman)

**Related Themes:**     

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 13

### Explanation and Analysis


When Simon asks why Roelf wants to find Red Doek, Roelf explains that he feels compelled to curse at her. This plan hinges on Roelf either learning her name or finding her grave. He needs this explosion of verbal violence to be personal and intimate, and Roelf believes that he can only conceive of Red Doek as an individual if he can identify her by name. He also plans to curse at Red Doek "in both official languages." The "official languages" he refers to are Afrikaans and English, the two dominant colonial languages of South Africa. However, much of South Africa's population speaks various ethnic languages, and in fact South Africa recognizes 11 official languages. Roelf's description of the colonial languages as the "official" ones demonstrates his casual racism. That racism becomes more explicit when he refers to Red Doek as a "selfish black bitch." His mental state is rapidly deteriorating, and he has chosen to blame this entirely on Red Doek without considering what drove her to commit suicide. Not only does he refuse to empathize with Red Doek, but he also racializes her perceived

“selfishness,” connecting it to her Blackness.

☞ ROELF: You don't understand anything. I've crashed! I was on the rails, I was going forward, everything up to schedule...until it all crashed. Thanks to that woman with the red doek I don't know if I've got a home anymore. I don't know if I've got a family anymore, or a job or...ja...a life. You said it: this is the place for the ones without names...and I think I'm one of them now. Roelf Visagie? Who the hell is he? You got your spade so dig another grave, man.

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie (speaker), Simon Hanabe, Red Doek (The Woman)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 14


### Explanation and Analysis

Simon urges Roelf to leave Shukuma and go home, but Roelf refuses, claiming that he has nothing to go back to. He has lost all the features of his life that made him feel like a distinct person, including his family and his job. Roelf associates this loss of personhood with the namelessness of those in the unmarked graves. This further highlights the link between losing one's name and losing identity. Roelf believes that losing himself is the same as losing his name, since his name no longer refers to a concrete person. He then goes further, equating that lack of identity with death. Now that he has lost himself, he believes he might as well be buried among Shukuma's dead. Roelf also describes the destruction of his life through the metaphor of a train crash: he was “on the rails,” moving “forward” according to “schedule,” until “it all crashed.” This extended metaphor illustrates how Red Doek's death on the tracks haunts Roelf. It shapes his perception of the world around him and of his life, picturing everything through the lens of the train crash that changed him irreversibly.

## Scene 2 Quotes

☞ ROELF: ...And did you also hear “looked on helplessly”? You at least know what that means, don't you? That means that the seriously traumatized train driver, who is me, could do fuck-all about it. That's what they all jump on...But...I already know all that. So then if it wasn't me, then who was it? God? That's right. Because there was only God and me seeing how it happened. We were the only other ones who saw the look in her eyes, saw the baby's head peeping over her shoulder! So if it wasn't me, then was it Him?...God was only a witness, because it was Roelf Visagie who was tramping down so hard on the brake so that the wheels was screeching on the tracks.

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie (speaker), Simon Hanabe, Red Doek (The Woman)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 19

### Explanation and Analysis

Roelf explains the circumstances of Red Doek's death to Simon by reading him a newspaper article about the incident. He pauses when the article claims Roelf “looked on helplessly,” which prompts Roelf to ruminate about his own responsibility for the collision. The article, as well as the people in Roelf's life, assure him that since he could not stop the train in time, he is not responsible for Red Doek's death. Roelf accepts that he was helpless to stop the train, but he does not believe that helplessness frees him from responsibility or blame. He fixates on the intimacy of Red Doek's death. Only he and God bore witness to “how it happened,” and the fact that Roelf “saw the look in her eyes” connects him to Red Doek in a way he does not understand. While God remains simply a witness, however, Roelf both saw and participated in the suicide. He tried and failed to “tramp[] down the brakes” to stop the train, and in his mind, that failure makes him responsible for the deaths of Red Doek and her baby.

☛ ROELF: All I could think of to say was, “What the fucking hell are you all staring at?” And Lorraine said, “These are your children, Roelf Visagie--go swear at your woman from the bush.”...When I heard those words it was like something just opened up inside me, because I suddenly realized you see that that is what I wanted to do! Ja! I wanted to take a deep breath and then load up my lungs with every dirty thing I had ever heard and then say them into the face of that woman, who still stands there waiting for me in my dreams. I wanted those to be the last words she hears when my train hits her...But the trouble was I didn’t know her name! I mean you know how it is. When you talk to somebody in your mind you think their name, don’t you?

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie (speaker), Simon Hanabe, Red Doek (The Woman), Lorraine Visagie (Roelf’s Wife)

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 22

### Explanation and Analysis

Roelf tells Simon the story of his mental and emotional decline following Red Doek’s death. For a few weeks, Roelf appears to improve, but after a violent nightmare about Red Doek, he destroys the family’s Christmas tree. When his wife Lorraine comes into the room with her and Roelf’s children, Roelf swears at them. Lorraine’s demand that he “go swear at your woman in the bush” inspires Roelf to find Red Doek’s grave and swear at her in order to find closure.

In Roelf’s brief descriptions of Lorraine, he makes it clear that she harbors the same casual, ignorant racism as Roelf himself. She is also obsessed with hygiene and cleanliness, which the play implicitly connects to wealth and whiteness. Roelf’s desire to “scream” “every dirty thing I had ever heard” at Red Doek thus suggests that he wants to purge himself of “dirty thing[s]” and return to the comfortable ignorance of his life. The way he believes he can accomplish this is by “load[ing]” those “dirty thing[s]” onto Red Doek instead. Lorraine’s description of Red Doek as “your woman from the bush” also carries racist connotations, since the bush is where poor Black South Africans like Red Doek live. Once again, however, Roelf runs up against the fact that he doesn’t know Red Doek’s name. Despite Red Doek’s constant presence in his thoughts and dreams, he needs to know her name to be able to address her directly.


### Scene 3 Quotes

☛ ROELF: This place is a bloody disgrace to humanity!... Have you got no respect for the dead? Because if that is the case then you are worse than those dogs in the bush. And you know why? Because these are human beings lying here and you are also supposed to be one as well...(An excited little laugh as an idea occurs to him)...Ja!...you can even make a cross with [the stones]!... (On his hands and knees, placing stones on the graves) See how easy it is....

(...Roelf moves to another grave where he makes another cross. His behavior is becoming increasingly absurd.)

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie (speaker), Simon Hanabe

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 26

### Explanation and Analysis

Roelf hopes Simon will remember where he buried Red Doek and her baby, but their search among the unmarked graves yields no results. Roelf snaps, lashing out at Simon and threatening to dig up all the graves until he finds Red Doek’s. As he loses hope, Roelf begins to complain about how the graveyard does not properly respect the dead, which he has already lamented to Simon in the past. However, instead of simply shouting at Simon for his treatment of the dead, this time Roelf emphasizes *why* the dead deserve respect: “these are human beings.” He calls Simon’s apathy towards the dead an inhuman trait, comparing Simon to a wild dog. Roelf is still angry and misguided, but he is starting to develop empathy for the dead bodies in the graveyard.

Roelf also tries to take action to address the lack of respect, while in the first scene he only stood helplessly and denounced the graveyard--yet his attempt to counteract his helplessness is futile and driven by an unhinged mania that the stage directions describe as “absurd.” Roelf is trying to regain some of the agency he lost when Red Doek forced him to participate in her suicide, but his efforts do nothing to recover his dignity or mental health.



●● SIMON (...He speaks firmly but gently): You must stop now looking for her.

ROELF: For who?

SIMON: For Red Doek.

ROELF: Red Doek?...

(For a few seconds the name means nothing to him...)

ROELF: That's right...Red Doek...I'm looking for her...(He is speaking very quietly)...and her baby...You realize, don't you, Simon, that it was a woman...a mother...with her baby on her back that stepped out on to the rails...there in front of me...and waited...for me...for the end...staring and waiting...

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie, Simon Hanabe (speaker), Red Doek (The Woman)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 27


### Explanation and Analysis

Roelf's attempts to lay crosses on the graves escalate until Simon steps in. For the most part, Simon has watched and listened to Roelf passively, but here his role as caregiver expands. He recognizes that Roelf's search for Red Doek is unproductive and possibly doing more harm than good, and he interrupts Roelf to make that clear. Meanwhile, the fact that Roelf briefly forgets Red Doek speaks to his increasing confusion and his decreasing stability. It also suggests that Roelf is correct about needing to know someone's name before he can properly hold them in his head. When Simon brings up Red Doek, "the name means nothing" to Roelf, as if his appellation for her has slipped his mind. When he does remember her, however, Roelf extends more empathy to Red Doek than he has in any other moment. He does not rage or swear at her memory; he slowly, painfully, acknowledges that she was a mother with her baby. When he asks if Simon has realized this, Roelf makes clear that he himself has only just processed it. He has finally come to think of Red Doek as her own person, and that allows him to consider the collision through her point of view, imagining her "stepp[ing] out on to the rails" and "staring and waiting."

●● ROELF: Makes you think, doesn't it? All of them...some mother's children...one day you and me also...(Gestures to the graves)...and that's how it ends for everybody. Yes...make no mistake my friend...black man or white man...the worms don't care about that...it's all the same to them...

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie (speaker), Simon Hanabe

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 28

### Explanation and Analysis

Roelf calms down after Simon stops him from making more crosses, and he contemplates his own experience with death. He remembers when his mother died, and he recalls watching a movie about mummies with decomposing flesh. He recognizes that Red Doek no longer looks like the woman he sees in his head, and now looks more like the decomposing bodies in the movie. Thinking about dead people as simply bodies helps Roelf develop his burgeoning empathy, as he realizes that all people, regardless of race or background, will be rendered equal by death. His memory of his mother also reframes his understanding of Red Doek and the others buried at Shukuma. Red Doek was a mother to her baby, but she and everyone buried around her are also "some mother's children." These notions are not simply philosophical; Roelf explicitly includes himself in them, illustrating how his closeness to Red Doek's death has forced him to reckon with his own mortality.

## Scene 4 Quotes


●● SIMON: I sing to [the ghosts]. I sing like my mother sing to me when I was a little boy and she carry me on her back....

ROELF: You think they hear you?

SIMON: Ewe. They go back to sleep....And all is quiet again.

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie, Simon Hanabe (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 33-34

### Explanation and Analysis

Roelf asks Simon if he believes the graveyard might be home to ghosts, and Simon responds in the affirmative. Simon explains that when he hears the ghosts at night, he sings to them. Simon's past and his emotional state are not explored as deeply as Roelf's; his primary role in the play is to guide Roelf toward closure and ask him questions that force Roelf to scrutinize his own beliefs. Simon's recollection of his mother's songs is one of the few moments of insight into


Simon's life and how he feels about it. He left his family in Hluleka, but he still cherishes the memory of his mother's lullaby. The lullaby, which is in Simon's native language of Xhosa, demonstrates how words and language can connect people who are separated by distance or death. The play explores the important roles language can serve--from the connection between Roelf and Simon or Simon and his family, to the violence Roelf wants to inflict on Red Doek by swearing at her. Simon's description of the "quiet" "sleep" of the dead suggests that language will inevitably give way to silence, as life gives way to death.

☝ ROELF: Don't you feel a bit sorry for them? A little bit sad?  
SIMON: No...Why you ask me so much?

ROELF: Why? Because it's one of your own people for God's sake. It was certainly somebody's...I don't know...husband or brother if it was a man, or somebody's mother or sister or wife if it was a woman. One thing I know for sure is that if I had to dig a hole and put one of my people in it, I'd have some very strange feelings inside me...even if I didn't know their name or who they were or what they were.

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie, Simon Hanabe (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 34

### Explanation and Analysis


Roelf is growing increasingly curious about what it is like to bury bodies, and he asks Simon several questions about his experience as a gravedigger. Finally, he comes to this question, which seems the most significant to him. Roelf is once again considering the dead of Shukuma in relation to the people they would have known in life. He has no information about their individual identities, so he tries to construct identities for them by imagining what roles they might have played in other people's lives, which emphasizes the importance of connection and relationships. Roelf also assumes that Simon would grieve the bodies in Shukuma because they are "[his] own people"--that is, Roelf assumes that in addition to feeling basic empathy for everyone, Simon should have particular loyalty to other Black people. Roelf is gradually overcoming his ignorance and prejudice, but he is still conscious of the divide between white and Black South Africans and assumes that each group will be

able to empathize more effectively amongst themselves.

☝ ROELF: I was thinking about those pondoks in the bush...and I was thinking...she lived in one of those pondoks...Ja! That was what Red Doek called home. A young woman, a mother, with her baby! You get it? That is fucking hopeless, man. Think about it. Wouldn't you also want to go stand on a railway line and wait for the next train if that is all life has to offer you and your baby? And then to make it worse...that is still not the end...Because the big happy ending is that Nobody Wants Her!...Nobody came to claim her! Nobody wants her! And when we start looking...even we can't find her.

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie (speaker), Simon Hanabe, Red Doek (The Woman)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 34-35



### Explanation and Analysis

Roelf explains to Simon why he has been so frustrated at their failure to find Red Doek's grave. He has come to relate to Red Doek, and he can't bear the fact that she has been left unwanted and unknown. Seeing Red Doek's home firsthand shook Roelf because it has forced him to realize that if he were in Red Doek's situation, he might also seek to end his life. He could not muster up sympathy for Red Doek at first, but now that he has witnessed part of her life, he has unwillingly found empathy for her--he understands and even shares her feelings to an extent. Since he saw the pondoks, Roelf has had to acknowledge that Red Doek lived a "hopeless" life, and he positions that hopelessness as a justification for her suicide. This way of thinking suggests that hope is necessary for survival, since its absence can drive people to death. Roelf is also dismayed that "nobody wants her," since the fact that Red Doek's solitude persisted after she died indicates that her death is as hopeless as her life.

## Scene 5 Quotes

☝ ROELF: Sometimes I think...that for me you will forever just be Red Doek standing there on the tracks, and that for you I will forever just be a white man staring at you in the few seconds before you die. But...it can't be as simple as that!...You see, I don't really know what your story is--who you are, where you come from, what's your name...But now, thanks to all I've seen and heard in the past few weeks...I got some sort of idea, some sort of feeling about your world. You see, Red Doek, most of us white people got no idea about what it's like because our world is so different! We always think we know--like Lorraine my wife--she thinks she knows everything about you people...and I did as well...but the truth is we don't.

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie (speaker), Red Doek (The Woman), Lorraine Visagie (Roelf's Wife)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 38

### Explanation and Analysis

While Simon sleeps, Roelf walks among the graves and speaks to Red Doek's spirit. He reveals that he has become aware of the ignorance of white people, which continues because he, and other white South Africans like him, harbor false beliefs of what the Black "world" looks like. This notion that they "know[] everything about you people" allows white people to live in ignorance without guilt, since they don't think they need to examine systems of oppression more closely.

Only after confronting the realities of life in a poor Black squatter camp has Roelf come to question and eventually overcome his prejudice. This speaks to the importance of communication and connection across the racial divide. What drove Roelf to visit the pondoks was his initial moment of connection with Red Doek, when they looked at each other on the tracks. Roelf refuses to believe this moment could be meaningless, so he searches for its possible significance and, in the process, challenges his own racist ideas.

☝ ROELF: I don't know what it is like to live without hope, to give up. Because you did, didn't you? That is why you did what you did because you didn't believe anymore that good things was going to happen to you and your baby. I'm thinking about it all the time now, trying to imagine what it was like for you.

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie (speaker), Red Doek (The Woman)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 39

### Explanation and Analysis

As Roelf talks to Red Doek's spirit, he acknowledges the limits of his own empathy but promises to push those limits. He describes empathizing with and understanding Red Doek as an ongoing process. He has not shared her experiences, so he "[doesn't] know what it is like to live without hope." Nevertheless, he continues "trying to imagine what it was like," which indicates that Roelf is not willing to accept his current understanding of Red Doek as it stands. He wants to construct a fuller picture of her, and to do that, he commits to keeping Red Doek in his thoughts.

Roelf says that he doesn't know what it is like to "give up," and that is reflected in his dedication to developing his empathy. Roelf's involuntary participation in Red Doek's suicide rendered him helpless, and since then he has drifted with only a vague goal in mind. During this monologue to Red Doek, Roelf still lacks a clear plan for going forward, but his commitment to imagining Red Doek's life shows that he has more agency and hope than she did.

## Scene 6 Quotes

☝ SIMON: Roofie! There is bread and apricot jam....A little sweetness is good.

ROELF: The best is golden syrup on fresh white bread when it is still nice and warm. You ever had that?


SIMON: Never.

ROELF: You must try it some time. Lyle's Golden Syrup. When I was a little boy and we didn't have jam or syrup my ma used to sprinkle white sugar on my bread.

SIMON: When I was young there by Hluleka, me and my father, we used to look for wild honey in the bush. It's also nice.

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie, Simon Hanabe (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 41

### Explanation and Analysis

Simon and Roelf share a few meals over the course of the play, and this is their final one. Simon splits a loaf of white bread in half to share with Roelf and spreads apricot jam across both halves. The sharing of food between Roelf and Simon illustrates their growing bond and the basic human experiences that surpass racial barriers. The two men's different experience with sweeteners complicates that notion of a shared human experience. Both Roelf and Simon enjoy "a little sweetness," but their backgrounds have determined what kind of sweeteners they ate. Roelf, who grew up in privilege, is familiar with name-brand syrup and processed sugar, while Simon recalls gathering wild honey with his father. The play does not depict either method as superior to the other; they are simply different. *The Train Driver* asserts that black and white people are fundamentally equal on a human level, but it also acknowledges that the disparity of privilege has shaped how people of different races experience the world. In other words, the play makes clear that race is a social construct imposed on people who are otherwise the same, but at the same time, the effects of that social construct are tangible and important.

●● ROELF: I don't know what it means when I say she is mine, but I know she is because I feel that way inside my heart and so I claimed her. Nobody else wanted her Simon...I do, and that's the end of it. And I will also tell you that I know when that happened...when she became mine like nothing else in my life has ever really been mine before...it was when we looked into each other's eyes in the few seconds before she and her baby died...underneath me. And you want to know something else, Simon? Maybe it was like that for her also. Ja! Have you thought about that? That I was the last human being she saw. There was no hatred in her eyes, you know, Simon, no anger...just me...she saw me.

**Related Characters:** Roelf Visagie (speaker), Simon Hanabe, Red Doek (The Woman)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 43

### Explanation and Analysis

Simon tries to encourage Roelf to leave the graveyard, but Roelf refuses because he has yet to resolve his feelings about Red Doek. He tries to explain, and finally he divulges that he has "claimed" Red Doek. Roelf reveals the depth of his perceived connection to Red Doek as he claims that she is his "like nothing else in my life has ever really been mine before." The moment of Red Doek's death changed Roelf's life, and the feelings she inspired are entirely new to him. Likewise, his bond to Red Doek is something "like nothing else in [his] life." Roelf has described the moment in which he and Red Doek made eye contact before her death, and he has tried to convince himself that moment is significant. He has now come to understand *why* it felt significant: he was the last person Red Doek saw, and when she looked at him, he believes that she truly *saw* him, without judgment. After spending the play searching for Red Doek's identity, this monologue reveals that before Roelf's search began, Red Doek validated *his* identity. She saw him for who he is, and that moment of being truly seen led Roelf down a path to developing empathy for Red Doek and validating her identity in turn.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PROLOGUE

Simon Hanabe holds his cap in his hand and addresses the audience, using both English and Xhosa words. He introduces himself as “the one who puts the nameless ones in the **grave**.” He describes seeing a white man walking among the graves with names, which makes Simon warily curious. The man comes over and speaks to Simon, but his speech is unintelligible. The man returns to searching the graves until Simon takes pity on him and informs the man that no white people are buried in the cemetery. The white man explains that he is looking for “a black one without a name.”

Simon brings the white man to the **nameless graves**. The white man asks if Simon knows the names of the buried, and Simon says no--“these are the ones without names.” The man reveals he is looking for the grave of a young woman and her baby.

*Simon’s monologue establishes the significance of names in the story. He introduces himself by name, which immediately contrasts with his reference to “nameless ones.” He also foreshadows death’s prominence throughout the play by immediately announcing the setting--a graveyard--even before the physical set is revealed to the audience. Simon’s frequent use of Xhosa, and his description of a white man searching for a Black body in a segregated graveyard, also establish the racial and linguistic tensions that the play will explore.*



*Simon continues to emphasize the namelessness of those buried in the graveyard. He does not describe them as unidentified or buried in unmarked graves--instead, he repeatedly insists that the people themselves have no names. This highlights the lack of identity and individuality afforded to the bodies in the graveyard.*



## SCENE 1

On the outskirts of Port Elizabeth is the rundown graveyard of the squatter camp Shukuma. Most of the **graves** lack names and are marked instead by pieces of trash. Roelf Visagie, a white Afrikaans man, is exploring the graves “helplessly” while Simon watches, leaning on a spade. Roelf explains to Simon that Mr. Mdoda, the undertaker, told Roelf that Simon buried the woman he is looking for. Roelf laments the sorry state of the graveyard and angrily wonders why the graves are covered in rubbish. Simon explains that he has placed the trash because “there is no flowers in Shukuma,” and Roelf assumes that these grave markers are a sign of respect.

*Roelf is introduced as being out of his element and “helpless.” He aims to find a dead woman, but he has no concrete plan to achieve that goal and wanders impotently until Simon’s presence disrupts his helpless confusion. Roelf’s anger at the state of the graveyard also shows his ignorance of the institutional effects of poverty. He is frustrated that the residents of Shukuma do not respect their dead as he thinks appropriate, but he fails to consider what might prevent them from doing so. Simon’s explanation that “there is no flowers in Shukuma” calls attention to the fact that Shukuma lacks the most basic advantages of wealthier, predominantly white areas.*



Roelf protests that Simon should mark the **graves** with a wooden cross, but Simon points out that people would steal the wood for fires. This only pushes Roelf to further despair, and he claims that Hell is “where she deserves to be.” He recounts searching the local “pondoks” (huts) for someone missing a young woman and her baby, adding that the woman wore her hair in a red doek (headscarf). The people he asks dismiss him, sometimes rudely, and Roelf is disgusted at their living conditions. Finally, he meets Mr. Mdoda at the morgue, and the undertaker sends Roelf to Shukuma.

*The fact that wooden crosses would be stolen highlights how poverty forces people to prioritize practicality over gestures of respect or sentimentality, like placing crosses at the graves. Roelf does not yet grasp the impact that poverty and racial oppression can have on a life. Though he has witnessed the poor quality of life among the pondoks, Roelf so far refuses to empathize with the Black residents. His despair at his own situation, combined with his ignorance about race and poverty, spark his anger at the dead woman. He knows little about her, but he still condemns her to Hell.*



Roelf points to a **grave** and asks Simon who is buried there. Simon, shocked, responds that he doesn't look inside the body bags. He must dig the graves deep, so they are not disturbed by wild dogs or wind. He asks why Roelf is looking for the woman in the red doek, assuming that she must have been his servant. Roelf is reluctant to answer, but he reveals that he wants to curse her, violently, “in both official languages because [he is] fully bilingual.” He explains that she ruined his life, and he works himself into such a frenzy that he breaks into sobs.

*Once again, Roelf and Simon differ in their expectations of burials. Simon continues to prioritize pragmatism, while Roelf continues to search for any way the burial process might allow the dead to retain some piece of their identities. Simon's assumption that the woman in the red doek was Roelf's servant also emphasizes the racial divide in post-apartheid South African society, as Simon does not expect that Roelf would have any connection to a Black woman besides being her employer. Roelf's claim of being “fully bilingual” also calls attention to the linguistic divides in South Africa. Roelf speaks “both official languages”—that is, English and Afrikaans, the two dominant colonial languages in a country full of native tribal ones.*



Simon warns Roelf that the local young delinquents will attack a white man if they find him in Shukuma after dark. He refers to the gangs as “amagintsa,” local Xhosa slang for robbers, but has to clarify when Roelf doesn't understand that word. Even after Simon explains his meaning, Roelf refuses to leave. He insists that he has no home to return to ever since the dead woman, whom he has taken to calling Red Doek, made him “crash” off his previously set “rails.” He claims that he might as well be one of “the ones without names” who Simon buried.

*Simon, like Roelf, is bilingual, as he switches between English and Xhosa frequently, but bilingualism with a native language does not confer the same status as Roelf's ability to speak both colonial languages. Even when Simon explains the meaning of Xhosa words, Roelf refuses to listen to him. He accuses Red Doek of making him “crash” off the “rails,” and this language of a train crash foreshadows the explanation of the accident that haunts Roelf. His despair is so great that it drives him to relate to the nameless bodies in the graves, which suggests that Roelf might in fact be able to empathize, to some extent, with the Black residents of Shukuma.*



Simon hesitantly requests again that Roelf leave, because the *amagintsa* will come after Simon for letting a white man invade their people's resting place. More firmly, he orders Roelf to come with him. He prods Roelf with his spade and tells him to “wake up.” Roelf follows Simon.

*The threat of the amagintsa speaks to the fact that South African racial tensions are not one-sided: some Black residents of Shukuma have responded to white racism by fiercely protecting their own territory. Simon's desire to protect both himself and Roelf from this threat emboldens him to give Roelf a command. Simon consistently refers to the dead as “sleeping,” so his order for Roelf to “wake up” serves at once to draw Roelf's attention away from death, and to warn Roelf of the potential for his own death at the hands of the amagintsa.*



## SCENE 2

Simon brings Roelf to his candle-lit cabin and allows him to spend the night. Roelf remarks that if his wife, Lorraine, could see him in this place, she would make him soak in Clorox. Lorraine is obsessed with hygiene, and though it makes her happy, Roelf thinks she “carries it a little too far.”

Roelf tells Simon that he thinks about Red Doek every night and has to take pills to sleep. One night, he was talking to himself about the woman when Lorraine sat up and shouted at Roelf to “shut up about that bitch,” claiming that she could smell the woman throughout the house. Simon asks what the woman did to Roelf. Roelf admits that he doesn’t know if the woman did something to him or if he did something to her—all he knows is that she is dead and he is broken.

Simon asks what Roelf did to Red Doek, and Roelf bluntly states that he killed her. His coworkers and wife have assured him that he is innocent, assuming that since the woman was Black, she was intoxicated. Their assurances mean nothing to Roelf, though, and the woman’s face continues to haunt him.

Roelf shows Simon a newspaper clipping about the death, but Simon can’t read, so Roelf reads it for him. The newspaper reveals that a mother and child died on railway tracks on December 12, 2000, and Roelf ruefully notes the irony of killing someone at Christmastime. The article refers to Roelf as “the seriously traumatized train driver” and implies that he could have done nothing to stop the train. He has seen a therapist who tells him the same thing, but Roelf insists that the murderer is either him or God, since they are the only two who saw the woman and her baby die. Since Roelf was the one driving the train, he believes he is the killer and God is only a witness.

*Roelf’s remark that Lorraine would be horrified to see him in Simon’s shack suggests that Lorraine’s obsession with cleanliness is a manifestation of racist and classist beliefs. It calls into question what is “dirty” and whether those things should be automatically discarded as inferior. Roelf thinks that Lorraine goes “a little too far” with her fixation on hygiene, which indicates that although he does not entirely disagree with her viewpoint, he disagrees with its extremity.*



*Lorraine angrily calls Red Doek a “bitch,” which suggests that she shares her husband’s belief that swearing at a problem will relieve inner turmoil. This perspective highlights the simultaneous selfishness and despair that can lead people to inflict verbal violence on others. Roelf’s confession that he doesn’t know whether he or Red Doek is responsible for the current circumstance also marks the beginning of his shift in attitude towards her, as he moves from raw anger to confusion.*



*Roelf’s story reveals the prevalence of casual racism among white middle-class South Africans, as the people in Roelf’s life resort to racist stereotypes to offer him comfort. But these stereotypes are unfounded and hollow, and Roelf can’t fully believe in them. This indicates that his connection to Red Doek, however complex, challenges the white supremacist notions that Roelf is used to.*



*In addition to Roelf’s friends and acquaintances, the newspaper and his therapist also see Roelf as a victim and assure him that he was helpless to stop Red Doek’s death. However, it is this very helplessness that haunts him. He knows that he was helpless, but he cannot stop blaming himself for driving the train into Red Doek. He describes the act as lonely and yet intimate. Roelf and God were the only ones who watched Red Doek and her baby die, which at once forms a connection between Roelf and Red Doek and forces him to shoulder responsibility for her death.*



Roelf recalls the hopelessness in Red Doek's eyes before she died. The look in her eyes was ready for one of the graveyard's **unmarked graves**. Roelf pauses to recover from telling the story. Simon waits patiently for Roelf to continue, staring at him until he does.

Roelf continues to tell his story: in the weeks after the accident, he seems to be getting better. He keeps himself busy decorating for Christmas with his wife and children, but he suffers from nightmares. He falls asleep alone by the Christmas tree and dreams of Red Doek. In the dream, he is surrounded by crowds of onlookers cheering as if the killing is a sport. When Roelf wakes up, he is deeply disturbed. He turns the lights of the tree on and off until a "bomb" explodes inside him and he destroys the Christmas tree.

When Lorraine and the children come in to see the smashed tree, Roelf swears at them. Lorraine snaps that he should swear at Red Doek instead, and he resolves to make that his mission. He wants to punish the woman for forcing him into her suicide, but he doesn't know her name. He believes that he can't conceptualize the woman until he knows her name, so he plans to learn her name and swear at her in English and in Afrikaans.

Unfortunately, no one is able to tell Roelf the woman's name. He goes from person to person until he meets a policeman who sends him to Mr. Mdoda, and Mr. Mdoda sends him to Simon. Roelf begs Simon to understand, and he insists that the two of them are going to find her **grave** so Roelf can curse at it. Simon resists, but Roelf continues to argue. The men stare at each other in silence for a long time. Without relenting or refusing, Simon announces that he is going to sleep. He blows out the candle.

*Roelf equates the lack of hope in Red Doek's eyes with a readiness for death, which directly posits hopelessness as the cause of the young woman's suicide. This link between despair and death suggests that hope is a driving factor that keeps people living, and when they are deprived of hope, they lose the will to go on.*



*Roelf is able to suppress his guilt and rage for a period of time, but that suppression only makes the inevitable "explosion" more violent. Roelf tries to escape his feelings by focusing on his family, but his despair plagues his subconscious through dreams which eventually spur Roelf to action. This illustrates that ignoring an issue does not resolve it, whether that issue be internal anguish or South Africa's post-apartheid racial divide. Roelf's dream of being surrounded by a cheering audience while he kills Red Doek also suggests that Roelf's guilt is worsened by the refusal of anyone else to blame him for the accident. He is alone in his grief and rage over Red Doek, but he is also alone in his anger at himself for killing her.*



*Roelf is driven to find Red Doek after his pent-up emotions lead to an explosion of anger. He latches onto that anger to make sense of his feelings, and Roelf's rage informs his decision to find closure by swearing at Red Doek in both of his languages. Roelf's intention to learn Red Doek's name also conveys the importance of names and their relationship to identity. Not only does burying the dead in nameless graves revoke their own individuality, but it also prevents other people from conceiving of the dead as the individuals they once were.*



*Roelf and the audience both begin to learn the extent of Red Doek's solitude as he searches in vain for anyone who can identify her. The fact that no one even knows the woman's name highlights that her life and death have both been spent unknown and unloved. Despite learning this, Roelf still fails to empathize with Red Doek, and he remains intent to swear at her.*





## SCENE 3

The next day, the men return to the graveyard, and Roelf tries to get Simon to remember where he buried the mother and baby. After examining several **graves**, Simon points one out, but it is simply an old grave that he reburied after some wild dogs dug it up. Roelf erupts at Simon, swearing at him with such anger that Simon backs up in fear. Roelf threatens to dig up all the graves until he finds Red Doek and then bury Simon himself.

An agitated Roelf wanders among the **graves**. He condemns the graveyard as a “disgrace to humanity.” Once again his attention turns to the rubbish on the graves, and he wonders if Simon has any respect for the dead, or if the gravedigger is no better than the wild dogs. Roelf insists that the dead are human beings and Simon should be one as well. Roelf gathers rocks and begins a “deranged,” frantic attempt to make crosses on all the graves, while Simon watches with confusion and fear.

Roelf calls to Simon to join him. He suggests that Simon fetch the stones while Roelf makes the crosses, since Simon might make the cross upside-down and accidentally send a soul to Hell. As Roelf recalls leaving flowers at his own mother’s grave, Simon cautiously tells Roelf to stop—not only stop messing with the graves, but stop looking for Red Doek entirely.

Roelf takes a moment to remember his search for Red Doek. When he does, he goes limp and silent, whispering that Simon must realize the woman was a mother who brought her baby to wait for the end. Roelf makes one more cross and then crawls away. He expresses his fear that his mind is “all fucked-up,” since he keeps seeing the woman as she looked on the railway. Yet he understands she no longer looks like that; she will be decomposing as all bodies do. Roelf muses, “black man or white man...the worms don’t care about that.”

*As Roelf’s frustration reaches a boiling point, he changes from the helpless and confused man that Simon met to an angry, somewhat unhinged man with a single-minded obsession with fulfilling his goal. It becomes clear that his unresolved feelings about Red Doek’s death are deeply damaging his psyche as he lashes out at Simon, the one person who has tried to help him.*



*Returning to the graveyard has renewed Roelf’s obsession with respecting the dead. He still cannot understand the oppression and deprivation that might have led the residents of Shukuma to neglect their dead, so he instead dehumanizes them. He calls their graveyard a “disgrace to humanity” and compares Simon to a wild dog, all the while oblivious to how his own “deranged” behavior is growing less rational and respectful.*



*Although Simon has cared for Roelf and helped him on his quest to find Red Doek, Roelf still assumes a position of authority and expertise over Simon. He instructs Simon to assist him in making crosses but forbids him from making a cross himself. Despite this, Simon continues to try to help Roelf. He can see the effect the search for Red Doek is having on Roelf, so he interrupts Roelf’s mania to advise him to stop.*



*As Roelf breaks down after his outburst, he reflects on Red Doek as an entity unto herself—she was not only the woman he killed, but she was also a mother with a baby. This moment of empathy allows him to stop making crosses and assess the situation more clearly. Roelf has so far failed in his aim to swear at Red Doek, so he swears at himself. He has no description of what is wrong with his mind besides that it is “all fucked-up,” which he repeats throughout the play. Roelf frames death as an equalizer, since Black and white people alike become corpses when they are in the ground. However, the disarray and neglect of the Shukuma graveyard calls this into question, especially compared to Roelf’s expectations of a graveyard and his memory of placing flowers at his mother’s grave. After death, Black and white people might be equal in terms of the forces of nature, but they are still segregated and treated with unequal degrees of respect.*



The wild dogs bark in the distance, and Roelf points out that dogs don't care about race, either. He tells Simon that he has a dog whom he hates, and Simon notes that as a child he had two dogs, one black and one white. Roelf laughs that the pair of dogs are like Simon and Roelf--one black and one white.

Simon speaks more about his childhood. He grew up by Hluleka and was called Andile Hanabe before he adopted Simon as a "whiteman's name." He hunted fish with his dogs and made fry fish for his mother and sister. As he tells this story, he switches from using the Xhosa word for "yes" to using the Afrikaans word. Simon smiles thinking of fried fish, and Roelf agrees that fried fish are good with fried potatoes.

## SCENE 4

Simon splits a dinner of baked beans and **bread** with Roelf in the shack. He calls Roelf "Roelfie" and "Roofie," and Roelf calls Simon "Andile." Simon reveals that the amagintsa threatened him when he went to the shop, but Roelf insists that he isn't afraid. Simon says Roelf knows nothing about his world and compares the amagintsa to the wild dogs of the bush.

Roelf asks Simon if he believes in ghosts. Simon responds emphatically in the affirmative. He claims to hear the ghosts' sad voices at night. He responds to the ghosts with a Zulu lullaby in Xhosa that his mother used to sing to him. Roelf asks if the ghosts hear the lullaby, and Simon tells him that his song lulls the ghosts back to sleep.

*Roelf and Simon are two very different men of very different backgrounds. And yet, when Roelf jokingly compares them to Simon's two dogs, he conceives of himself and Simon as a pair. The characters do not lose their awareness of race as they begin to bond with each other, but as Roelf learns to empathize with Simon and Red Doek, race loses its status as an insurmountable hurdle in the way of friendship.*



*Simon's story about changing his name adds another aspect to the play's connection between names and identity. While Red Doek has lost her name and her identity, Simon has taken on an additional name in order to construct a new identity in a predominantly white area. His use of Afrikaans words also illustrates the growing bond between Simon and Roelf, as Simon is adopting some of Roelf's vocabulary.*



*The characters' use of each other's names demonstrates that names inform an individual's understanding of their own identity as well as other people's understanding of that individual. Simon calls Roelf by pet names to show their growing intimacy, and Roelf calls Simon the name he was born with, suggesting a new respect for Simon's background.*



*The notion of ghosts grants some agency to the otherwise helpless dead, allowing them to temporarily wake from what Simon calls their "sleep"--however, their time awake is sad and mournful. Simon left his family in Hluleka, but his memory of his mother's lullaby suggests that he loves and misses them. The fact that the song is a Xhosa translation of a Zulu lullaby also speaks to the many languages of South Africa and their rich history outside of the influence of colonialism.*



Roelf asks if Simon grieves or pities the bodies he buries, but Simon only cares about being paid. He marks the **graves** not out of respect, but to remind himself not to dig there again. He asks why Roelf keeps pressing the issue, and Roelf is horrified that Simon could be so apathetic towards “[his] own people.” With growing discomfort, Roelf explains that standing in the graveyard has made him empathize with the people buried there and with the woman he killed. He imagines her living with her baby in a pondok in a “fucking hopeless” life, and he concludes that he would want to stand on a railway line, too. Roelf laments that even in death the woman’s suffering is not at an end, because no one wants to claim her and the only man looking can’t find her body.

Roelf no longer wants to swear at Red Doek’s body. He isn’t sure what he wants. Simon suggests that Roelf speak to the woman’s ghost. Roelf puzzles over this, ultimately resolving that he doesn’t know what to do and neither does Simon. Simon dismisses him and continues to eat his dinner.

*The two men once again clash as Roelf’s sentimentality confronts Simon’s practicality. Roelf’s horror that Simon does not mourn “[his] own people” suggests that Roelf expects loyalty and comradeship among Black South Africans, without thinking critically about what might stand in the way of that notion. After facing the pondoks and the graveyards, Roelf has finally come to empathize with Red Doek. He understands the extent of her hopelessness, and instead of cursing her, he now curses the lack of hope that led to her suicide.*



*Roelf’s intention to swear at Red Doek was misguided and unproductive, but it gave him an objective. Now that his empathy for Red Doek has overcome his anger at her, he is at a loss for how to find closure.*



## SCENE 5

While Simon is sleeping, Roelf leaves the shack to walk among the **graves**. He speaks to Red Doek, imagining that her ghost is in front of him. He reflects on how strange it is that to him, Red Doek will always be just a Black woman with her baby on the tracks, and to her, Roelf will always be a white man staring at her. He refuses to believe in that simplicity, and he insists that he and Red Doek share their suffering in common.

Roelf tells Red Doek that looking for her in the pondoks has given him an idea how Black people live. He realizes that although white people think they “know everything” about Black people, they actually know very little. He guesses that Red Doek stepped onto the tracks because she lost hope that life would ever be good to her and her baby. Whenever Simon blows out the candle in his shack, Roelf thinks of the darkness around him as the same as the darkness within Red Doek.

*As he speaks to Red Doek, Roelf addresses one aspect of her death that haunts him: the distillation of both his and her identities into who they were at the moment of her death. He has hunted for her name in the hopes of learning who she was beyond simply being a Black woman on the train tracks, but the oppression of poverty and racism have rendered her unknowable to him. Roelf has overcome his initial outrage at her anonymity; he believes that he can connect with Red Doek without either of them truly knowing each other, since they both have suffered.*



*Roelf admits to his racial prejudice, and he admits further that his ignorance reflects a systemic problem. Since white South Africans believe they “know everything” about their Black neighbors, they never seek to learn more. Seeking knowledge ended up being Roelf’s path to empathy. That empathy has allowed him to grasp how utterly Red Doek’s life deprived her of hope, both for herself and for her child.*



Roelf believes that he must “do something,” because Red Doek no longer has a chance to do anything. He fears that he might forget her. He is still fixated on the fact that no one claimed Red Doek’s body, even though she, like all human beings, was made in God’s image. To make up for this, and to prevent himself from forgetting her, Roelf claims Red Doek. He asserts that he “wants her to be his,” and if he ever forgets what happened to him and Red Doek, God must damn him to Hell.

*Roelf’s simple profession that he must “do something” highlights the importance of agency. Red Doek lived a life seemingly without much agency, or ability to act on her own behalf, and now that she is dead, she will never have the opportunity to remedy that. Roelf, however, refuses to remain helpless. He takes action to amend the uncaring response to Red Doek’s death by claiming her as his own. Roelf’s belief that all human beings are equally made in God’s image also echoes his earlier claim that worms don’t care whether the bodies they eat are Black or white—only in this case, the equalizer is not death, but creation. Roelf has come to believe that all people are inherently equal, and this belief appears to have transformed him. While once he wished Red Doek would go to Hell, now he willingly faces damnation himself in the interest of keeping her memory alive.*



## SCENE 6

Roelf is quiet as Simon splits a **loaf of bread** between them and spreads apricot jam across it. Roelf recalls the brand-name honey he used to put on bread as a child, and Simon fondly remembers looking for wild honey with his family in Hluleka. Roelf knows he cannot stay with Simon, but he doesn’t feel like his mission is finished.

*As Roelf and Simon share memories of food as they eat, it becomes evident that their backgrounds shaped how they have interacted with food, but both men enjoy the same basic flavors. This commonality represents how factors like race and class affect people in important ways, but they do not undermine the basic human experiences that all people share.*



Roelf tells Simon that he knows they won’t find Red Doek’s **grave**, but he can’t leave because he has claimed her. Simon is startled, thinking that Roelf has developed a sexual attraction to Red Doek, but Roelf explains that his feelings for her are not like that. When they locked eyes just before she and her baby died, she became Roelf’s “like nothing else in [his] life has ever really been [his] before.” He wonders if Red Doek felt the same connection to him, as the last person she ever saw. He remembers that her eyes held no anger or hatred; she simply saw him. This is why, unlike Simon, who buries the bodies and walks away, Roelf cannot leave.

*The question of identity has been important to Roelf throughout the play, but it has primarily manifested in horror at how the identities of the dead have been robbed from them. As he describes Red Doek seeing him on the tracks, he reveals that he also values his own ability to be seen and known—in other words, his identity. Simply being witnessed by Red Doek was enough to bind him to her. His claim that this moment made Red Doek his “like nothing else” suggests that Roelf does not believe he has truly been seen by anyone but Red Doek; and, in turn, this moment of shared understanding has allowed Roelf to develop empathy he did not know he was capable of.*



Simon looks out over the **graves** and wonders how many people are “sleeping” in them. He tells Roelf that he is collecting another nameless body tomorrow, and he requests that Roelf bury her. They will project Red Doek’s identity on this body, and when Roelf buries her, he can walk away. Roelf agrees. When Simon goes to sleep, Roelf takes the spade and goes outside. He starts digging a **grave**.

*Though Roelf has undertaken a complex emotional journey, he still cannot think of a way to finally find closure. It takes Simon to guide Roelf toward action. Simon understands the importance of naming and identifying Red Doek’s body, but he is not as immediately invested in the matter as Roelf. This, as well as his persistent practicality, allows him to come up with a tangible course of action to help Roelf. However, Roelf is too obsessed with Red Doek to wait until morning, so he starts digging in the middle of the night.*



## EPILOGUE

Simon once again addresses the audience, and he tells them how the story ends. The amagintsa come in the night, and Simon in his shack hears shouting and swearing. In the morning, Mr. Mdoda arrives with a new corpse, and he and Simon find the ground covered in blood. Simon digs and finds Roelf stripped naked, buried in the **grave** he had been digging last night.

*Simon has warned Roelf about the amagintsa throughout the play, but Roelf has always ignored him. By leaving the shack at night, Roelf reveals a willingness to put himself in physical danger in order to achieve emotional resolution. Roelf succumbs to physical violence after spending much of the play wanting to inflict verbal violence on Red Doek, which highlights the limits of verbal violence when compared to its physical counterpart—and yet, the amagintsa’s murder of Roelf is accompanied by swearing, suggesting that verbal violence can lead to or enable physical violence. The fact that the amagintsa bury Roelf in the grave he dug for Red Doek cements the connection between Roelf and Red Doek, as Roelf is metaphorically united with Red Doek in the grave that was symbolically intended for her.*



The police believe Simon killed Roelf, but when Simon protests his innocence, they ask instead why Simon “let this whiteman die here” among their people. Simon takes Mr. Mdoda’s advice and pretends not to know Roelf. The police confiscate Simon’s spade because it has blood on it, and Mr. Mdoda fires him. Simon is left without a job or a spade, and he holds his hands out to the audience in a “helpless gesture.”

*When Simon pretends not to know Roelf, Roelf symbolically loses some of his identity. He goes from being a train driver and a friend to a nameless white man who encroached on Black territory. On the other hand, Roelf is a well-off white man with a family, so he will likely not be buried in an unmarked grave like Red Doek was. This complex relationship between namelessness and privilege mirrors the intricacies of oppression in post-apartheid South Africa. Death can easily rob people of their identities, but those with privilege can regain a fraction of that identity when they are buried. Simon, meanwhile, is left “helpless.” He has spent the play in the role of caretaker, guiding Roelf when Roelf’s own helplessness overwhelmed him. Simon is rewarded by being stripped of agency and left at the mercy of his employer and the police—and this fate is the final image the audience is left with, suggesting that the audience is meant to consider where they fit into the complex web of agency, complicity, and helplessness*





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