



The Wall That Outlived the Law

South Africa abolished apartheid more than thirty years ago, yet the divisions it engineered have proven far harder to remove than the laws that built them.

For nearly fifty years, South Africa ran one of the most rigid systems of racial separation the modern world has seen. It was called apartheid, an Afrikaans word meaning "apartness." Beginning in 1948, the government did not simply allow discrimination to happen. It built it carefully, with laws, paperwork, and police.

The first step was to [classify](#)¹ every person by race. Officials sorted people into categories such as white, black, coloured, and Indian. This single act decided almost everything about a person's life: where they could live, what jobs they could hold, whom they could marry, and which schools their children could attend. A thin line on a government form became a wall that ran through millions of lives.

The black [majority](#)², who made up most of the population, suffered the heaviest losses. They were forced out of their homes and pushed into separate areas. Many lost the right to vote in the country of their birth. The small white population kept the best land and most of the nation's [wealth](#)³, while passing that advantage down through families. Children grew up to [inherit](#)⁴ either privilege or poverty, depending only on the colour of their skin.

Resistance grew steadily. Leaders, students, and ordinary workers protested, organised strikes, and demanded change. The state answered with arrests and force. One of apartheid's fiercest opponents, Nelson Mandela, spent twenty-seven years in prison. Yet pressure kept building, both inside the country and abroad. Other nations refused to

trade with South Africa or play sport against it. Slowly, the cost of keeping the system became too high.

In 1990, the government finally agreed to [release](#)⁵ Mandela. Over the next four years, both sides sat down to negotiate a peaceful path forward, even though anger and fear remained on every side. In 1994, South Africans of all races voted together for the first time. Mandela became the country's first black president, and apartheid as a legal system came to an end.

Dismantling the laws, however, did not erase their effects. The damage had been built over decades, and decades cannot be undone in a single election. Today, South Africa remains one of the most unequal countries on earth. Wealthy suburbs sit only a short drive from crowded townships where clean water and steady jobs are still hard to find. The neighbourhoods that the old maps created have proved remarkably [stubborn](#)⁶, refusing to fade even as the laws behind them disappeared.

There has been real progress. A new constitution promises equal rights to everyone, and a growing black middle class has emerged. Yet the gap between rich and poor continues to follow old racial lines more often than anyone would like.

The story of apartheid is a warning about how quickly injustice can be made into law, and how slowly its shadow lifts once that law is gone. South Africa tore down the wall, brick by brick. But the ground where it stood still carries the shape of what was there, reminding the world that ending a system is only the beginning of repairing the harm it caused.

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VOCABULARY — KEY WORDS FROM THE STORY

| # | WORD | DEFINITION | EXAMPLE SENTENCE |
|---|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| 1 | classify <i>verb</i> | to arrange people or things into groups according to shared qualities or characteristics | " <i>Librarians classify books by subject so that readers can find them easily.</i> " |
| 2 | majority <i>noun</i> | the larger number or part of a group; more than half | " <i>The majority of students passed the exam, but a few had to retake it.</i> " |
| 3 | wealth <i>noun</i> | a large amount of money, property, or valuable possessions | " <i>The family built its wealth over three generations of careful investment.</i> " |
| 4 | inherit <i>verb</i> | to receive money, property, or a quality from someone after they die, or to be born with something passed down from earlier generations | " <i>She inherited her grandmother's house and her love of gardening.</i> " |
| 5 | release <i>verb</i> | to set someone or something free, or to allow something that was held to go | " <i>The court decided to release the prisoner early for good behaviour.</i> " |
| 6 | stubborn <i>adjective</i> | determined not to change your behaviour, opinion, or position; also used for problems that are difficult to remove | " <i>He is too stubborn to admit that he made a mistake.</i> " |

COMPREHENSION — ANSWER THE QUESTIONS

QUESTION 1 — MULTIPLE CHOICE

According to the article, why does the author describe the racial classification system as the 'first step' of apartheid?

- A-) Because it was the only law the government ever passed about race
- B-) Because the category a person was placed in then determined nearly every other part of their life
- C-) Because it was the easiest rule for the police to enforce
- D-) Because most South Africans agreed with how it worked

QUESTION 2 — MULTIPLE CHOICE

What does the article suggest finally pushed the South African government to end apartheid?

- A-) A single court ruling that declared the system illegal
- B-) The natural death of all the leaders who had created it
- C-) A combination of internal resistance and international pressure that made the system too costly to maintain
- D-) A sudden change of heart among the white population

QUESTION 3 — SHORT ANSWER

The article uses the image of a 'wall' throughout. Explain how this image helps the reader understand both the building and the lasting effects of apartheid.

COMPREHENSION ANSWERS

My score today ___ / 3

Q1 Because the category a person was placed in then determined nearly every other part of their life ✓ Correct (B)

The text states that classification 'decided almost everything about a person's life: where they could live, what jobs they could hold, whom they could marry, and which schools their children could attend.' It is called the 'first step' because every other restriction flowed from it, making it the foundation on which the rest of the system was built.

Q2 A combination of internal resistance and international pressure that made the system too costly to maintain ✓ Correct (C)

The article describes resistance growing 'both inside the country and abroad', notes that 'other nations refused to trade with South Africa or play sport against it', and concludes that 'the cost of keeping the system became too high.' No single ruling or event is credited; it is the combined pressure that the text identifies as decisive.

Q3 **Answer:** The wall works as a metaphor for separation that was deliberately constructed and is hard to take down. At the start, the author shows the wall being built, saying a 'thin line on a government form became a wall that ran through millions of lives', which makes an abstract policy feel solid and physical. At the end, the author says South Africa 'tore down the wall, brick by brick', yet 'the ground where it stood still carries the shape of what was there.' This contrast captures the article's key point: the laws (the wall) could be removed, but the marks they left in society (the shape in the ground) remain. The image therefore links the careful construction of injustice to the slow, incomplete work of repairing it.

Explanation: A strong answer should identify 'wall' as a metaphor for racial separation, quote or paraphrase at least one example of the wall being built and one of it being removed, and explain the contrast between removing the laws and erasing their effects. Top answers will connect the image directly to the article's main argument about lasting harm rather than treating it as mere decoration.

VOCABULARY — TRANSLATION & NOTES

classify

Often followed by 'as' or 'into': 'The species was classified as endangered' or 'workers classified into grades'. The related noun is 'classification'.

majority

Its opposite is 'minority'. With a singular 'the majority of' plus a plural noun, the verb is usually plural: 'the majority of people are'.

wealth

It is uncountable, so do not say 'a wealth' meaning money. Common collocations include 'create wealth', 'accumulate wealth', and 'the distribution of wealth'.

inherit

You inherit something 'from' someone. It is also used for problems or situations a new leader takes over: 'The new manager inherited a struggling team.' The noun is 'inheritance'.

release

Used for people ('release a hostage'), products ('release a new phone'), and information ('release a statement'). The same word can be a noun: 'the release of the report'.

stubborn

For people it can be negative (unwilling to compromise). For things it means hard to get rid of: 'a stubborn stain' or 'stubborn unemployment'. The adverb is 'stubbornly'.

YOUR TURN — SENTENCE BUILDING

Mastery comes from practice. Write original sentences using today's target vocabulary.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

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