

## KEY TEXT 4: SKIN

*Skin* (2008), directed by Anthony Fabian, is the true story of Sandra Laing, a black woman born into a white family in South Africa during the racially divisive era of apartheid. The film charts her persistent and often futile attempts to define herself. Sandra's incongruous place within this society highlights not only the social effect someone like her has on the state, but the wide-reaching personal impact it has on those around her. The film shows how both internal and external forces have determined her place in the world, a place that is continually being contested. The film tragically suggests that she is unable to settle in any of these worlds, not because of any fault of her own, but because of others – reinforcing that her attempts to define her place in the world and her identity are brought undone by the world she was born into.

### APARTHEID

South Africa was settled in the seventeenth century by Dutch settlers wishing to create a new world and society. Most were very religious and believed in the racist attitudes of the era. These settlers later became known as Afrikaners, literally Africans. For them, they were the natural owners of Africa. They were largely Calvinist, belonging to a strict Christian church. Calvinism argues that faith is the guiding light in people's lives, and that people's place in life is pre-determined. South African settlers applied this belief, justifying the enslavement of the indigenous inhabitants of South Africa. The Afrikaners claimed that they were the natural and God-given inheritors of the country.

English settlers arrived in South Africa in the early nineteenth century. Their motives were less to do with personal and societal liberation, but more to do with commerce and strategic interests: the British Empire was expanding and in need of both resources and military outposts, and South Africa provided them with both. Despite this commercial drive, the British brought with them the concept of liberalism. While liberalism was not an anti-racist movement, it was one that did not agree with slavery; accordingly it was abolished not long after they arrived. After the Boer war and a number of aggressive business deals, the Anglo settlers of South Africa largely managed and ran the country, leading to considerable resentment by many Afrikaners. Over the next one hundred and fifty years, South Africa's population grew but was still unofficially divided along racial lines. Those at the top were from an African or English background. Those further down the scale, were the descendents of Indian workers imported to perform manual labour, or lower level managerial jobs. Those below them were the coloureds, and blacks. While the black, largely indigenous population comprised the largest section of society, they held almost no power or influence. Their role in society was largely as manual labourers or maids.

In 1948, following the electoral victory of the National Party, a series of laws commonly known as apartheid was enacted and strictly enforced. The National Party was comprised largely of Afrikaners, men who were still resentful of rule from Anglo-South Africans, and fearful of the possibility of blacks holding power. This led them to attempt to structure society in a manner they felt was correct, and was done through a series of laws commonly known as apartheid. Apartheid divided society along racial lines. Those at the top, the white population, retained the rights of any citizen in a modern democracy, such as freedom of movement, the ability to vote and the right to a fair trial. Despite this, they were banned from associating with blacks and coloureds, except in commercial or business settings. Those further down the imposed racial scale had legal restrictions placed upon them, from limiting their level of education, segregating black and white people into separate areas, and banning marriage between people of different races. Society became tightly partitioned, with every person classified according to race. Class became specific to race.

This unnatural classification had serious consequences on the social fabric of the nation. While many fought against this division of society, it was accepted by a large number of people. Apartheid produced a significant level of fear and resentment in South Africans, not only towards the ruling government, but towards those not like them. Common humanity was discarded in favour of their racial identity. *Skin* illustrates the damaging effect of such laws on an individual who cannot fit into the neat legal separations of apartheid. Sandra's case is illustrative of the flaws of such a system. All of Sandra's attempts to live within

these rules, or move beyond them, end largely in failure. Even once apartheid is abandoned Sandra still finds many of these problems of identity exist, suggesting that while apartheid may be legally dead, it continues to have a lasting and corrosive effect on people.

### IT IS NOT SKIN DEEP: THE ROLE OF RACE IN SKIN

The most obvious link with identity is the racism that permeates the film. This is clearly seen through Sandra's father Abraham, who regularly looks down upon the black people who work for him, those who are lower down the social scale. This racism, demonstrated by other characters, reinforces their own racial preconceptions and the prejudices of those they are judging.

For Sandra, this overt racism initially manifests itself at the boarding school she is sent to as a young girl. It is the first time in the narrative she is explicitly judged, and establishes the powerlessness and confusion she regularly feels throughout her life. While at school, the reality of her skin colour and implied race turns her into a kaffir in the eyes of the students. This racism is not limited to the students: her teachers beat her because she is a black person in their white school. Even though her parents and brother are white, she represents a threat to their own sense of identity and power. This distinction between Sandra and those in the school, helps them define who they are. When those in the school see Sandra, they know she is not one of them. Sandra's existence presents a threat to their understanding of themselves, so she must be excluded. This is reinforced by the statement "She does not belong here" used by the principal to argue for her expulsion. Similarly, once Sandra has left school and wishes to buy a dress, even though by this stage she is legally white, she is not allowed to enter the shop. This demonstrates how skin colour was an overwhelming determinant of identity in South Africa, not just for black people.

Sandra is initially unable to see race as a determinant of identity. Nor is she able to understand the importance of race in South Africa. She states early on "I'm not black", not as a racial statement, but as a socialised statement. From her perspective she is merely being who she is. Her sense of identity is not yet formed according to race. This is reinforced by the fact she has a white doll. This is an indication to the viewer that she does not necessarily see any difference between the doll and herself. While the audience is meant to find the sight of her with a white doll unusual, to her, she is not behaving oddly. She identifies with those she is around, not necessarily with what she sees in the mirror.

Once Sandra is aware of these differences, she searches for solutions to her question of identity. One of the servants says to Sandra "you are not black". This could be interpreted as either comforting a confused young girl, or an indication that despite her skin colour, she is not ethnically or socially black. Her life is, and should be, lived in the white world of her family. This statement is meant to confront the viewer, indicating that identity and belonging need not be based upon narrow and restrictive labels – that the same labels that determine others will not necessarily determine her.

Her father's gift to her of the skin whitening lotion is one indication of the importance of skin colour or race in South Africa. As he hands it to her, the implication is that by using it she will become part of the white world. The viewer is meant to feel uncomfortable with this act. It could be interpreted as racist, an attempt to define identity along racist lines; however, it is portrayed to the audience that her father is not doing it for his benefit or out of any embarrassment he feels, but rather to make her feel less self-conscious outside her family. While there is an understanding that others will judge her because of her skin, Abraham attempts to show her that she is a part of the family, that for him the colour of her skin does not matter.

When her parents try to set her up with young white boys, their attempts invariably end in disaster. One date says "you don't have to feel bad about looking like a coloured", a statement about the fact he can see the colour of her skin, but is unwilling to let it bother him. This moment shows one of the few non-racist attitudes of white characters in this section of the story. Despite this, she feels other people judging her according to her race. They are visibly uncomfortable that she is in a white cafe. Sandra feels particularly unwelcome and her response to this embarrassment is to climb out of the window in the toilet. This shows that for Sandra, her place in society is more important than a relationship

**Incongruity:**  
something that is out of place

**State:**  
refers in this instance to the wider government and all of its power

**Liberalism:**  
a broad term that argues individuals possess rights and responsibilities. These concepts can not be taken from individuals by the government or society

**Boer War:**  
this was the war fought between Afrikaner farmers and British troops from 1899–1902. It was typified by violence and repression, particularly by the British government towards Afrikaners. Afrikaner settlers surrendered in 1902

**Coloured:**  
someone who has both a black and white parent, usually a black mother and a white father

**Sandra is:**  
• passive  
• innocent  
• strong  
• sad  
• lonely  
• hopeful

**Permeates:**  
to spread all the way through something else

**Preconception:**  
an idea someone already holds, not necessarily logical or truthful

**Kaffir:**  
term of abuse used to describe black South Africans

**Socialised:**  
a point of view that has been arrived at through interaction with people

**Abraham is:**  
• strong  
• loving  
• practical  
• family-minded  
• blind  
• stubborn  
• unforgiving

with someone who does not care about her race. Her own awareness of her skin colour and its role in South African society is determining her behaviour. She is only able to cope with her socially constructed identity, in this case a young black woman among white people.

Other dates end badly, with many of the young men assuming she is willing to sleep with them because of the colour of her skin. This attitude was linked to the idea that black women were public sexual property for white men. Despite her family, education and upbringing, these young men, and by implication the rest of society, can only see her as a black woman and will therefore treat her like one. She is being defined according to others.

Once Sandra leaves her family and becomes part of the black world of South Africa, she feels a greater sense of acceptance. This other world appears to be a home and she has an identity she can hold onto. The warmth shown to her by many of the older black women in the film hints at this possibility. The behaviour of these women is meant to indicate that they are, in a sense, colour-blind to her skin. Despite her status as a white woman, she is merely a member of the extended family or, like them, just another woman.

This developing sense of a secure identity is, however, undermined by her husband, Petrus who claims that "in your head you're still white." This is meant to be interpreted by the viewer as one of the reasons why Petrus mistreats her. Despite her race, she still does not belong among those she looks like, enhancing the sense of unease she feels in any situation. Even though she looks like a black person, her socialised behaviour is still too close to that of a white person for her to be acceptable to her husband. In the same manner as she is excluded from the school, she is excluded from the black world; she represents something Petrus is not, therefore she is not able to be part of his world.

This is an indication that while she may be black and will be treated on a superficial level as a member of the black society of South Africa, there are more complex and deep-seated reasons for her exclusion from such a society. Her inability to define herself as living within these two societies is one of the central tragedies of the film. She is perpetually judged and found to not be part of their world; this produces a lack of ability to understand and define her sense of self.

## ARE YOU YOUR FAMILY? THE ROLE OF FAMILY IN DETERMINING IDENTITY

*Skin* suggests that the role family plays in determining identity may be stronger than the rigid social structure of South Africa's apartheid. There are two central families; the most prominently featured one is the family Sandra is born into.

At the start of the film Sandra's family defines her sense of self. She loves her family, who looks after and fights for her. Even when these battles are misguided or pointless, such as the attempt to keep Petrus away from her, the audience is able to see the love her family feels for her. This solidarity is seen earlier when she is being reclassified as white. Her parents state that they are happy to wait standing up, when the alternative would be for them to be separated. She feels deep affection for them, and identifies herself as a member of the family. This is best seen when her younger brother Adriaan, another dark skinned child, is born. She states that he "looks just like Pa". Even though the viewer can see there is little resemblance between father and son, for Sandra there is. She is only able to see the family as reflections of each other.

The rest of the family appears to share the same desires and understanding of each other. Family is central to Abraham, and this is shown through his repeated claims that Sandra is his daughter. This suggests that, like Sandra, Abraham is attached to the centrality of family. Despite the evidence that indicates she is not biologically related to Abraham, she is clearly a member of his family. His attempts to have her reclassified as white are explained as "I'm doing it for her, I'm doing it for all of us". Similarly, it does not matter for her mother and brother: her mother loves her unconditionally, and her brother sticks up for her at school. Her father's inability to see the colour of her skin as determining her parentage is demonstrated when he states that "She'll marry an Afrikaans because that's what she is".

It is only when discussing the relationship between Sandra and Petrus that Abraham's underlying racism challenges his sense of family. He says "I didn't let the state take her away, I'm not going to let some bloody kaffir tear my family apart". This reinforces the sense

that his family is more important than anything else. It also shows that Abraham decides who is and who is not a member of the family. When he threatens Petrus, the implication is that Abraham is not only trying to ensure she maintains her status as a white woman, but also to exclude anyone else from making the decision about her identity. The further tragedy of this situation is that the family can not see that their inclusion of both Sandra and Adriaan is explicitly not racist, yet their exclusion of Petrus is decidedly so. The legality of apartheid has turned into an emotional truth for them.

Sandra's subsequent decision to choose Petrus in favour of her family, breaks her family. Much of the blame is to be laid at Abraham's sense of impotence over the control he has over Sandra and who she is. There is an acknowledged tension in the narrative about this since it is also clearly an attempt by Sandra to assert her sense of self and to determine her life, but it is also a type of abandonment. Sannie says to Sandra's younger brother Adriaan "She left you too, you know". While this is not a totally accurate retelling of why she is no longer in the family, it is still recognising that she is now excluded from the family. Sandra is no longer allowed to use her family to define her identity.

While Sandra establishes a degree of identity when she becomes involved with Petrus, there are problems that are not resolved. Petrus is resentful of the power her family apparently has over her. Petrus feels that despite the fact she is living with him and had children with him, she is too much a member of her old family. He tells her "You can always go home"; even though she responds with "This is my home", he cannot accept it. Petrus's sense of self, like that of Abraham's, is tied to the control he has over his family. His family is his own, and not to be split up by other people. Similarly, Sandra is still unable to break away from her established sense of self (the fact that she leaves Petrus is testament to this). She returns to her original home, but it is abandoned, signifying not only that her family have left, but that she is unable to relate to them anymore. She is no longer a member of the family she was born into.

It is worth noting that in the first two sections of the film, it is largely men who attempt to define Sandra. Any strong female figures, such as her mother and Petrus's mother, are marginalised. This shows not only the patriarchal nature of apartheid, but also more general concerns about male subjugation of women. Sandra, despite her best attempts, is unable to conform to these modes of womanhood, and she is punished for it.

For the rest of the family, her decision to be with Petrus is traumatic. Abraham retreats from any memories he has of her, going so far as to burn and destroy any reminder of her in the family. Her clothes and photos of her are burned to demonstrate her erasure. The end titles of the film state that her brothers still have not contacted her, which indicates her dismissal is still apparently in effect. This implies that for them, their sense of family identity has been forged without her. To let her back into the family would invalidate their understanding of themselves.

Her mother Sannie, while wanting to continue the relationship with her daughter accedes to Abraham's desires. This shows that despite her desire to be a part of Sandra's life, she is only able to see an identity for herself with Abraham. Her sadness over not knowing Sandra and her children is overwhelmed by her fear of not belonging to the family with Abraham.

Sannie accepts this bargain; in a way Abraham does not. When he is near death his desire to see Sandra again is refused by Sannie, who claims "You made your choice". This shows that she understands and is willing to accept the decision she made not to see Sandra again. For her, the belonging she feels in the family with Abraham, must mean something. There must be a reward for making such a difficult decision. To go back on it is to deny the identity she chose earlier.

Interestingly, once Abraham dies, mother and daughter are reunited, and the white doll that initially appeared to be unusual is no longer so. It is seen as part of a wider family memory. It takes Sandra back to the positive time when she did belong to the family. This reiterates the idea that "You never stop needing your parents, they're a part of who you are". This is especially true for Sandra who displays considerable grief at not being part of the family, ironically using her own father's motto "never give up" to motivate her and her sense of self.

Finally, the family relationship Sandra establishes with her own children also addresses the themes of identity. While the children are not prominent in the story, there is a tension between her children and her family, most notably when they state "Aren't we enough for

### Petrus is:

- strong
- joyous
- resentful
- jealous
- violent
- angry

### Sannie is:

- loving
- understanding
- bitter
- sad

### Patriarchal:

when men control all aspects of a society. They are the ones that both hold and decide who has power

### Accedes:

gives in to someone else, usually a legal term

### Reiterate:

to restate something

you?" when she expresses a desire to join the rest of her family. This shows that not only are Sandra's children attempting to find their own sense of identity through their mother, but they are also trying to claim that they are more important than her family in the definition of herself, a point Sandra appears to struggle with.

### **I AM WHAT YOU ARE NOT: THE ROLE OF THE STATE IN DETERMINING WHO YOU ARE AND YOUR PLACE IN THE WORLD**

The central idea of the film hinges on the South African state. Because of the narrow and rigid nature of apartheid, Sandra's skin colour is a central determinant in her life. While she is initially classified as black, by a doctor of the state, she is reclassified as white following her father's persuasive legal argument. This produces numerous problems for her sense of self, and how others view her. While it is stated "You are white according to the government", Sandra's sense of self and security is still contested by others.

In a sad irony, both Sandra and Sannie are liable to lose their children, both strong determinants of the difficulty in classifying people. This is meant to show the absurdity and incapacity for the state to make judgments about people's identity and sense of self. While the judgment is meant to seal many of the attitudes people have towards Sandra, it is also repeatedly undermined by people's own largely negative desires to classify her in a manner they see fit. This is clearly shown when she feels uncomfortable in the cafe, or when she is trying to find a dress to wear.

When Petrus states "Her skin is a curse", he refers to her legal, not actual, skin colour. Petrus is, like many others in the film, judging her legal status and the impact it has on her and how others see her. It is a legal status that Petrus is unable to reconcile with his own.

In a cruel ironic twist, the doctor who originally classified her reappears once the apartheid regime has fallen. In this instance he assists her attempts to find her family, a fact that highlights the state's ability to help people determine their identity and sense of self. Now all are equal in the eyes of the law and Sandra is able to access the same sort of state as other citizens. The implication here is that when the state tries to categorise people in such a rigid manner, it fails, but when it attempts to help people discover themselves, it is much more successful.

### **NO ONE NOWHERE: HOW TO SURVIVE WHEN YOU DO NOT FIT IN ANYWHERE**

The biggest tragedy is that Sandra is, until the end of the film, unable to find a place for herself. She is unable to work out who she is. Part of this is because she has a passive personality. Through events largely out of her control she is unable to stop others from determining her place in the world. She is caught between numerous worlds and perceptions of herself, none of which can be reconciled. In the face of a lack of strong will, she is excluded from all of them. This produces a lack of stability and impermanence. This suggests that the individual must be permitted to exert control over their sense of self, that to allow others to determine it is dangerous and ultimately damaging.

For Sandra, her ultimate method of survival is to detach herself from any involvement with assessments about herself. She reluctantly answers the television crew's questions, and does not want to sign the newspaper in which she appears. This is despite the obvious excitement of her co-workers holding the newspaper. It shows an unfortunate deadening of her spirit in the face of debate concerning her place in society. After numerous classifications and assessments, her sense of self is shattered. Her identity has been formed and reformed too many times for Sandra to work out who she might want to be.

Interestingly while Sannie's statement of "You can't help what you're born with, but you can help what you become" is used to warn Sandra against falling in love with Petrus, it is this sentiment that provides Sandra with a more concrete and valid sense of self. She finds support and help in the older black women in South Africa, passing messages to her mother once she leaves with Petrus. This assistance is used to show that Sandra belongs, if not among black women, then at least among people who see beyond race.

When Sandra is within the black community, her sense of self is heightened. She fulfils a role as a letter writer, demonstrating that she has a place within this community. While it is not pursued significantly in the film, it does show her a way of determining her sense of self. The final shot of starting the business next to her house is the vindication of her father's saying "Never give up". Her shop has become her home, it is where she defines her sense of self. She is no longer victim to others' definitions of who she is.

Despite this assessment, she is also following in her family's footsteps by establishing a shop. This argues that even though she may be finally defining herself, she is still partially beholden to an older identity, one that exists outside of narrow constraints of race. Her newly discovered identity exists because she has determined her sense of place and self.

### **FOCUS QUESTIONS**

1. 'Our relationships with others help us to determine who we are.' How relevant is this to Sandra? How relevant is it to her father?
2. 'Having a sense of being different makes it difficult to belong.' How is this shown in the film?
3. 'To be true to yourself in a world that is trying to make you something else is the greatest achievement.' How does Sandra show this?
4. How many of the characters are unable to find their sense of selves, and in what manner?
5. 'Fitting in often requires you to suppress who you are.' Is this what Sandra does?

**Passive:**  
something or someone that is not active, and lets others make decisions for them

**Reconciled:**  
brought together again

**Impermanence:**  
a lack of stability and consistency