

Heroes in Literature and In the Real World

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Nelson Mandela



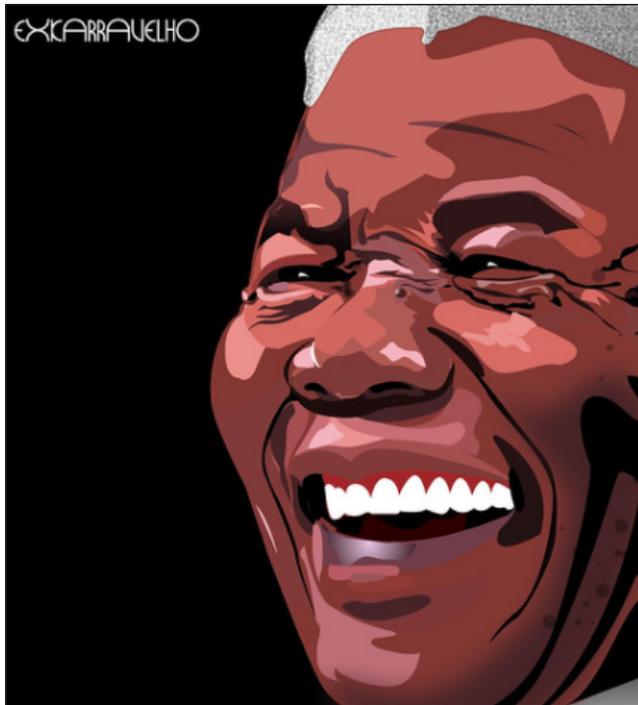
What makes Nelson a hero: Nelson Mandela is a world-famous hero, because he spent 27 years in a horrible prison on Robben Island for serving the cause of his people.

Notes

Nelson's time in jail: Nelson Mandela is a world-famous hero, because he spent 27 years in a horrible prison on Robben Island for serving the cause of his people.



Robben Island was for more than 400 years used to house convicts, lepers, and the mentally ill. The first political prisoners were 18th century Black men, whom the white Dutch settlers of South Africa called “Indiaanen banditen” (Indian bandits) because they were unwilling to submit to slavery by the whites. By the 19th Century, warriors from the Xhosa tribe, Mandela’s own, were imprisoned there because they had revolted against British rule. In 1960 the island was made into a jail specifically for political prisoners. The prison-island was situated in cold, dangerous waters eight miles from the mainland. Prisoners were cruelly abused and dehumanized: kicked, spat upon, reviled. When the boat that carried Mandela to Robben Island landed, the guards shouted in Afrikaans (a form of Dutch) “Dis die Eiland! Hier julle gaan dood,” translated into English as “This is the island! Here you will die.” The prisoners worked endlessly, from dawn to dusk, pounding huge rocks into gravel. Talking among them was not allowed. They slept on flat woven mats, in their clothes. They ate corn mush and burned corn made to look like coffee twice a day. Once a day they washed with seawater in buckets. They were not allowed to listen to the radio or read newspapers. Their only contact with the outside world was with the *one* visitor they were allowed every six months. The visit lasted for 30 minutes and guards watched and listened to the conversation between the inmate and his visitor to be sure that they never discussed politics but confined their talk to family matters. Consider what it was like for a well-educated Black young lawyer to live under such conditions for 27 years.



Summary of Nelson’s Life: Nelson Mandela was born in the Thembu royal house in a tiny village in southern Africa in 1918 and was named Rolihlahla, which can be roughly translated as “troublemaker.” His father, Gadha Henry Mphkayisa, was a chief, born to the role and recognized as such by the king of the Thembu tribe, in the Xhosa nation, as well as by the British government that ruled South Africa. His mother, Nosekeni Fanny was one of the chief’s four wives. By Xhosa custom, cousins were raised as brothers and sisters, and all the father’s wives acted as mothers to all his children. When Rolihlahla was still a small boy, his father lost his chieftainship for refusing to appear before a local British judge on a minor dispute. By refusing to appear in court, Chief Henry, as he was called, was in effect saying that as a

Thembu chief he was not subject to British law. The loss of Chief Henry’s position also meant



the loss of their money, land and livestock. Suddenly poor Rolihlahla and his mother moved to the village of Qunu where his mother's family lived. His father visited them in their mud hut one week a month.

Mandela was hardly aware of his poverty because he loved Qunu. He thought of the rugged, beautiful countryside as his true home for the rest of his life. Moreover, he was surrounded by family; he and his cousin/brothers and sisters played in the grasslands all day long, and at evening returned home to hear stories of the Xhosa warriors of the past. Chief Henry, uncharacteristically, wanted his son to have an English education, so Rolihlahla was sent to a one-room schoolhouse run by missionaries. On the first day of school the teacher gave each child an English name, and that is how Rolihlahla became Nelson. He was a very intelligent boy, and he quickly picked up the solid groundwork of a British education (for nothing about their own culture was ever taught in white-run schools.) Shortly after, Nelson returned from school to find his father quite ill, lying on the floor and violently coughing. Chief Henry died a few days later. Then Nelson's mother took him on a long walk which ended in the Great Palace of Chief Jongintaba, the leader of the Thembu people. Because Nelson's father had aided the king many years before, Chief Jongintaba took charge of Nelson's upbringing and raised him in the royal Palace with his own children.

The great chief became Nelson's friend, mentor, and guardian. In 1934, Nelson, now 16 years old, with 25 other Thembu boys underwent a series of rituals that would guide them into manhood that ended in circumcision. That "graduation" day was marked by a special ceremony that welcomed the new men into full adulthood. The featured speaker of the day was Chief Meligqili, and from his address to the assembled dignitaries, Nelson learned something of the true condition of his people. After congratulating the new men, the Chief turned to the audience and said:

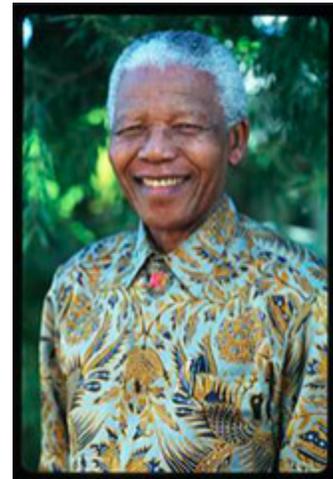
We have promised them manhood, but I am here to tell you that it is an empty, illusory promise, a promise that can never be fulfilled. We are slaves in our own country... [These young men] will cough their lungs out deep in the bowels of the white man's mines, destroying their health, never seeing the sun.... The abilities, the intelligence, the promise of these young men will be squandered in their attempt to eke out a living doing the simplest, most mindless chores for the white man. (14)

In the months that followed Nelson began to understand the chief's message: "He had planted a seed," he later wrote, "and though I let that seed lie dormant a long season, it eventually began to grow." Shortly after his coming of age, Nelson was enrolled in a boarding school run by whites and having completed what we might call Junior High School, he went on to a new school,



Healdtown. This High school was much larger than any of the schools he had attended before. There were students from all over South Africa. It was here, after hearing an address by the Xhosa poet, Krune Mqhayi, who had appeared for a reading of his works, that Mandela began to experience a conflict in identity. Krune had appeared wearing a traditional Xhosa leopard-skin cloak; he ended his talk with the students with the words “We cannot let these foreigners take over our nation...for too long, we have succumbed to the false gods of the white man. But we will emerge.” (15) The rallying cry left “many and sometimes conflicting ideas in my head,” Mandela has said. He began for the first time to wonder just where he fit into South African society as a young Black man being educated by whites, and to ask himself why blacks allowed whites to control their country.

The next step in Mandela’s education was to begin studies at the South African Native College at Fort Hare, the only Black college in the country. There he met Oliver Tambo, who would later become his law partner and close friend. Tambo was already involved in politics and slowly, as Mandela first became involved in student politics his enlightenment began. He was expelled from the college for having refused to accept an office in student government because the election had been boycotted by the majority of students. He returned home to an angry Chief Jongintaba, who had arranged a marriage for Mandela and his cousin-brother Justice. Neither young man was ready to marry, especially with a bride chosen for him. So, they ran away to Johannesburg to seek their fortunes, they sought work in the mines, Justice as a clerk as a security guard. When Justice was hauled home by the chief, Nelson decided to stay. He was hired by a successful black businessman, Walter Sisulu, who in time became Mandela’s life-long friend and political ally. Sisulu recognized Mandela’s exceptional intelligence and eagerness to learn, so he secured him in a job as an apprentice to a lawyer. The only other Black man in the law office was Gaur Radebe.



Both Sisulu and Radebe were active in the struggle for African rights. Radebe organized a bus boycott to protest a hike in fares. More than 10,000 Blacks marched in protest and boycotted “Native” (i.e., segregated) buses for nine days. The nonviolent protest, which Mandela had joined, succeeded, and so impressed was Mandela by its success that he joined the African National Congress. He wrote later:

I cannot pinpoint a moment when I became politicized...but a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand a thousand indignities, a thousand unremembered moments produced in me an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people. (22)



With Walter Sisulu and Anton Lembede, a Zulu activist, Mandela formed the ANC Youth League. He worked day and night for the cause, completing his college degree through a correspondence course by candlelight. To study for his law degree, he went on to The University of Witwatersrand, one of the very few Black students. At the university he was treated with casual cruelty: white students moved away from him when he sat down in class; he was often called a “kaffir” (a name comparable to “nigger” in our culture.) Mandela attended the university from 1943 to 1949, but he was not able to keep up with the work. When he asked the professor if he could rewrite some of his papers because, tired and hungry, he did not get home from work until late at night, he was refused. Mandela was forced to leave the school without his degree. In the early years after World War II, the young men of the ANC Youth League thought that conditions would improve in South Africa. The British and their allies, including South Africa, had just fought a war against the violent race hatred of the Nazis. It was not to be. In 1947 the British Royal family visited South Africa; among the cheering crowds were many, many Black people. The ANC boycotted the celebrations.

However, as oppressed as Black people felt under British rule, their condition was tolerable. In 1948, the Nationalist Party, largely supported by white Afrikaners, won an election that had run on a platform of apartheid (separation). The new all-white, anti-black Nationalist government claimed South African at last their own after decades of British rule. Harsh new laws were enacted. Every person in the country would be classified by race. Each race would live in separate parts of the cities. Marriage between races would be illegal. The ANC Youth League wanted action against this new repression, but the older, more conservative ANC was afraid to provoke the government. When, in 1949, the president of the ANC resigned, Mandela, Tambo, and other members of the Youth League were elected to the ANC national executive committee. Some black workers took part in the Communist May Day celebrations, but the ANC Youth League did not sponsor the demonstrations; half of the Black workers stayed home. Walking past the peaceful protesters, Mandela and Sisulu, the new Secretary of the ANC, saw mounted policemen approaching. They beat the peacefully assembled protestors with nightsticks. Then they began shooting. The next morning 18 Black workers were dead. “That day was the turning point of my life,” Mandela said. For the first time he had seen the full brutality of the police. Moreover, for the first time he realized that the masses of African workers would respond to calls for protest launched by the ANC.

As the government policies grew ever tighter and more oppressive, the ANC began to plan a civil disobedience campaign. The “Suppression of Communism Act” forbade not just communists but *all* groups from meeting in public places. The “Bantu Authorities Act” asserted that all Blacks must be given a separate and very limited education, so that, the government explained, they would not “aspire to positions they would not be able to hold in society.” (33) These prohibitive new laws sparked a huge civil disobedience campaign, the Defiance



Campaign, a program of continuous, passive resistance. In 1952 the ANC sent a letter to Prime Minister Malan demanding that the new laws be repealed. If they were not, the ANC declared, the Defiance Campaign would begin on June 26. The laws were still in place when, on June 22, Nelson Mandela spoke before a crowd of 10, 000 people. His inspiring speech proclaimed that the Defiance Campaign signaled the rise of a new hope for South Africa that unity among Blacks, Whites, and Coloureds could be achieved. Hundreds of demonstrators entered the township of Boksburg, refusing to carry the passes that the government mandated all Blacks to carry and present at the demand of any authority. The police were waiting inside the gates of the township most of the leaders were put in vans and taken to the closest prison. Mandela traveled back to Johannesburg to appear at a late meeting. Before he could speak, the police arrested everyone, and Mandela had the first of his many prison experiences in a dirty, overcrowded jail that crammed the protesters tightly together.

Mandela said later that frightening and squalid as the prison was, his two-night stay there inoculated him against fear of jail. “From the Defiance Campaign onward,” he said, “going to prison became a badge of honor among Africans. The Defiance Campaign made the government more determined than ever. Police raided the ANC offices, and even the homes of the leaders. The government banned Mandela from holding office in the ANC, but he was elected president of the Youth League anyway. Then it banned 52 ANC leaders, including Mandela, from attending any meeting, and even from talking to more than one person at a time. The Defiance Campaign was two edged. On the one hand, it brought the struggle for freedom to many, many more people, showing them the way to join the fight for their rights. On the other hand, it was used by the government to spread widespread fear among whites that they would be overrun by Blacks, Indians, Coloureds, and, of course, Communists.

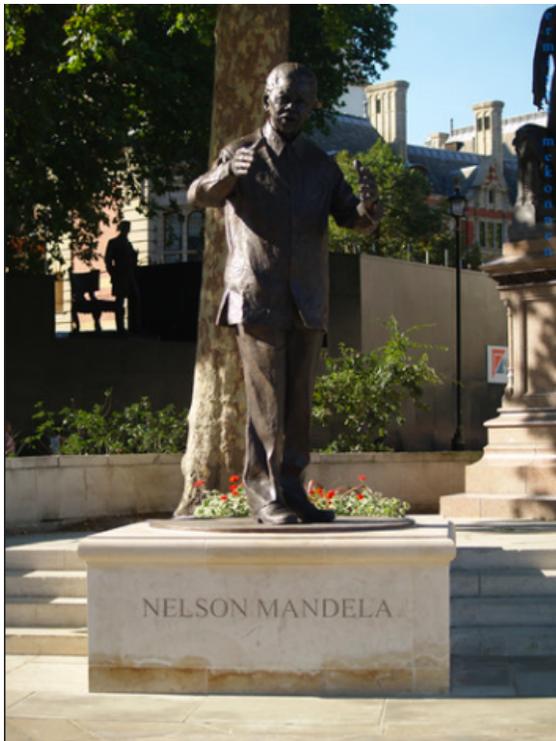


But the long range and most powerful effect of the defiance Campaign is that it established the ANC as the most important protest group in South Africa, and it established Nelson Mandela as one of the great leaders of the protest. In 1954, after the defiance Campaign had ended and Mandela had received a suspended sentence for organizing it, the Law Board sued to end Mandela's law career. He won the case, but his freedom to act was becoming more and more restricted. He could practice law, but not outside Johannesburg. He was forbidden from making speeches in public, from holding public office, and from working with the ANC. The next protest he led, with the ANC, was aimed at Sophia town, which was the only section of Johannesburg in which Blacks were allowed to own property. The residents were being forced out of their homes in exchange for tiny, totally inadequate "compensation." Mandela led this protest right after the bans that were restricting him ended, in June 1953. The crowd was angry. More than 2000 policemen removed the last tenants from their homes while the ANC members watched helplessly.

It was at this point that Mandela realized that nonviolence was ineffective against a violent government. "We have to employ new methods," he said, "it is no longer sufficient to speak from platforms." In consequence, Mandela embarked on a new project; compiling a Freedom Charter that would express the beliefs of the ANC. The contributors to the formation of the Freedom Charter came from every race and every political affiliation. Throughout the country meetings were held to brainstorm ideas for the Charter. "Slips of paper...came flooding in: a mixture of smooth writing-pad paper, ...school exercise books, bits of cardboard...portions of brown and white paper bags," etc. (40). At last, the voiceless were able to express themselves. The final document was presented to the Congress of the People on June 26, 1955. People from every walk of life, every race, every section of the country gathered in Soweto, 3000 strong, to listen to the reading of the document. It is based on the American Constitution and begins: "We, the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know: That South Africa belongs to all who live in it, Black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people." On the second day of the meeting, the charter, read aloud section by section, was to be approved by the people. When the last words were read, "there shall be peace and friendship," the police, who had surrounded the field for two days without interference, darted into the crowd. One of them seized the microphone and declared that the police were investigating high treason at the event. Early in December 1956, Nelson Mandela was arrested. The charge: high treason. He was one of 156 anti-apartheid leaders, Black, white, Indian, and Coloured, who were charged. Hearings began in January 1957. The preliminaries alone took nine months. The government had collected piles of "evidence" to prove its case—from "a "United Nations Declaration of Human rights to a Russian cookbook" (47). Many policemen, who could neither read nor write, described scenes they had supposedly witnessed at ANC gatherings. Although their vast ignorance was exposed, the hearings dragged on.



Curiously, as the seemingly endless proceedings continued, new respect and mutual good feeling was growing among the activists. It was during the trial that Nelson Mandela met, and after a whirlwind courtship, married Nomzamo Winifred Madikizela, the beautiful “Winnie” who was to become a powerful activist. She held meetings designed to teach public speaking to Black women. After a huge Antipas meeting in Pretoria, a policeman tried to arrest Winnie; she knocked him to the floor. In October 1958 Winnie, who was pregnant, insisted on attending a rally, where she was arrested and jailed. Mandela and the others were acquitted of high treason, but Mandela knew that the government was surely in pursuit, hoping to trap him again. He went underground. He did not appear in public again for 30 years. In hiding, Mandela, nevertheless, continued his work. He convinced the ANC that the nonviolence to which they had pledged themselves would never be effective against a government that continuously placed more and narrower restrictions upon blacks. He was able to convince the ANC to let him form a separate military organization, MK, which he led from his various places of hiding.



In 1961 MK began to employ guerilla tactics in what was now their *war* against the oppressive regime. They set homemade bombs off in power plants and in government offices in Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth and Durban. And, of course, the government responded with a manhunt for Mandela and his cohort members of MK. Meanwhile, Mandela, who had conducted recruitment campaigns all across the country while he was in hiding, left the country to attend the Pan African Freedom Conference in Ethiopia. He also stayed in Ethiopia for arms training. On his way home to South Africa, he was pulled over by police. He was charged now with inciting workers to strike and leaving the country without a passport. This time he was sentenced to five years in Pretoria prison. After six months he was one day handcuffed with three other prisoners and taken to Cape Town and ended up on Robben Island. After a few weeks of hard labor Mandela was sent back to Pretoria. He

could not understand why, until in the prison office he saw many ANC leaders who had been in hiding. Apparently, the ANC safe house had been raided in July 1963 and many documents were found that included the ANC’s plans for sabotage and guerilla warfare. Among the papers seized were dozens in Mandela’s handwriting. The penalty now could be death. At the subsequent trial, when asked for his plea, Mandela said, “It is not I, but the government that should be in the dock.



I plead not guilty.” (63). The prosecutor read the charges—among them organizing MK and planning over 200 acts of sabotage. The last hope of escaping the death penalty was quenched when one of the ANC saboteurs testified *against* Mandela, identifying him as the leader of MK and the primary planner of acts of sabotage. The government needed no more to convict. In June the convicted men appeared before the judge for sentencing. The judge first said that he would not give the men the supreme penalty. The joy of spectators at hearing this was quickly dispelled when Mandela was sentenced to life in prison on the terrible Robben Island.

In 1981 the ANC office in Mozambique was raided by South African soldiers, and 13 ANC supporters were killed. Forty-two more died in a similar attack in nearby Lesotho. In retaliation MK set off a car bomb in downtown Pretoria that killed 19 people and injured more than 200. Then the South African government bombed the ANC office in London. Violence was not only escalating but spreading. Then the now reigning Prime Minister offered Mandela a deal. He would be released from prison if he unconditionally rejected violence as a political instrument. As horrified as Mandela was at the death and injury of innocent people, he could not accept the deal, because he knew that violence was the only effective instrument against a government that never failed to use violence against its people. On February 10, 1985 before a packed stadium, Mandela’s daughter, Zindzi, read his message to the people, explaining why he had not taken Prime Minister Botha’s offer. He said, “I cherish my freedom dearly, but I care even more for your freedom. I cannot and will not give any undertaking at a time when you, the people, are not free.”

Mandela’s long-awaited release came slowly. The steps leading to it were: first, that protests *around the world* sprang up to demand his release; second, sanctions were declared against South Africa for its policy of apartheid, and institutions (especially universities) began to divest themselves of stocks in South Africa; third, De Klerk, a new president was elected, who, though he was in no way a reformer, recognized that apartheid could not be maintained against so strong an opposition from the whole international community. He allowed a rally protesting police brutality that was led by a great Christian and great reformer, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The beginning of the end of apartheid had arrived. Segregation on buses, and at parks, theaters, libraries, and bathrooms ended. In December 1989, Mandela and his fellow prisoners met with the new president and outlined their concerns. De Klerk listened. On February 2, 1990 De Klerk went to the South African Parliament and began to lay the groundwork for a democratic South Africa. The bans were lifted on the ANC and 30 other political organizations. Political prisoners were freed, and the death penalty was suspended. “The time for negotiation has arrived,” DeKlerk said. On February 11, 1990, Nelson Mandela was freed; he had spent 27 years in prison. A new Constitution for South Africa was ratified in 1996. Mandela traveled all over Africa and all over the world, and everywhere he went people celebrated him. In New York, he was given a ticker-tape parade, and the Empire State building was lit in ANC colors. Mandela





also received the Nobel Peace Prize. The world had recognized what the people of South Africa had always known: that Nelson Mandela was a great hero!

Discussion Questions:

1. Have students produce capsule histories of South Africa, accompanied by a map of Africa showing its location.

2. Compare Mandela's fight for freedom with that of Martin Luther King. Why did King's *nonviolent* campaign against segregation move more rapidly than Mandela's

Answer: Segregation laws, i.e., "Jim Crow" laws, were state laws, not federal. Therefore, ACLU lawyers could argue in court that the Constitution of the United States superseded any state law. Moreover, although segregation was strictly maintained in public facilities in the South, Blacks and whites lived closer together and had stronger ties to one another than did those groups in South Africa. (Cf. "Mammies," domestic servants, etc.)

3. How did Nelson Mandela first become politically conscious?

Answer: When he observed the brutal beating by police of peaceful protestors.

4. Winnie Mandela was a political activist in her own right. Have students create a capsule biography of her. Why did she and Nelson Mandela separate?

Answer: Winnie Mandela hired two young men as bodyguards, who beat and brutalized their *black* political proponents.

5. Who is Desmond Tutu? Have students write capsule biographies of Archbishop Tutu. Why might we argue that Bishop Tutu is also a hero?

Answer: Though he led protests against apartheid, after apartheid was lifted, Bishop Tutu established the Peace and Reconciliation meetings, in which former prison guards and policemen, who had brutalized Blacks, confessed their evil deeds and were, if not forgiven, then at least reconciled with those whom they had hurt and killed.

6. What was the ANC and what was the PAC? How did these organizations differ? Which was more effective?

Answer: The ANC was established first. They kept to their policy of nonviolence although they allowed Mandela to create a military wing of the organization. The PAC advocated stronger measures against the government. The ANC became a successful political party after apartheid was lifted.

