The Train from Rhodesia Study Guide

The Train from Rhodesia by Nadine Gordimer

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"The Train from Rhodesia" is one of Nadine Gordimer's earliest stories, first published in 1952 in her collection *The Soft Voice of the Serpent and Other Stories*. The short piece about a train's brief stop in an impoverished African village exhibits the concise complexity that marks much of Gordimer's other work. As a native South African of European heritage, Gordimer has focused much of her writing on the injustice of apartheid as practiced in the country. Though not an overtly political story,' "The Train from Rhodesia" depicts the prejudicial attitudes that caused apartheid and reinforced it once racial segregation became law. Critics have praised the story for its unflinching yet subtle social commentary, a tactic that allowed Gordimer to publish it in South Africa without it being censored. By presenting characters of both races who are degraded by their belief in racial inequality, the author shows how both black and white South Africans are harmed by apartheid. While readers debate the merits of her detached, unemotional style, many find themselves compelled by her passion. The story has been published in several of Gordimer's collections as well as in other general short story anthologies.

Author Biography

Nadine Gordimer was born in Springs, South Africa, a gold mining town near Johannesburg, in 1923. Her parents were Jewish emigrants from London. She began writing at age nine when a heart condition limited her activity. She credits her isolation and her powers of observation for her success as a writer—traits that were evident to her even at this early age. At the private schools she attended, she was confronted with the omnipresence of racial discrimination. Even amidst the Catholic church, blacks were not afforded any semblance of status or respect, and the young intellectual wondered why. Gordimer began publishing stories at age fifteen which were generally concerned with racism and generally published in liberal magazines. With the assistance of Afrikaner poet Uys Krige and Sydney Saterstein, her agent, she soon began to publish in major literary magazines and American literary journals like *The Yale Review*, *Harper's, Atlantic* and the *New Yorker.* This international recognition gained her a supportive audience during the times in which her own community sought to suppress her. Gordimer attended the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, and was married to Gerald Gavronsky in 1949. The couple had one child and divorced three years later. In 1954 she married Reinhold Cassirer, the owner of an art gallery, and subsequently they had a son. In the mid-1950s when she was barely thirty years old, Gordimer had published two highly respected collections of short stories and her first novel *The Lying Days*.

Much of Gordimer's work is concerned with how South Africa's volatile political situation negatively affects the lives of whites. Consistently, she has argued that apartheid hurts everyone, a belief that prompted the South African government to censor books like *A World of Strangers* and *The Late Bourgeois World.* The latter was banned for twelve years for portraying a friendship that illustrates what Gordimer called the "cruelty and idiocy of apartheid and the dangers of daily life for blacks." Aside from the political implications of her fiction, Gordimer is also known for her detached style, in which the narration appears very objective and scenes of great outward emotion are related with a sense of distance from the characters. In recognition for her talent as a writer, Gordimer has won many literary prizes, including the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1970 for A Guest of Honour, the book many call her best, and the 1991 Nobel Prize for Literature. Gordimer often lectures and teaches abroad, but she continues to live in Johannesburg.

Plot Summary

A train is heading toward a small, rural station in Southern Africa. The area around the station is impoverished, as are the people who live there. In the station, the stationmaster, the venders, and the children prepare for the train's arrival.

The train, from the white, considerably more wealthy area of Rhodesia, approaches the station. A young white woman stretches out of the train's window to look at a carved lion that an old African man has to sell. The poor villagers flock to the windows of the train, selling items or begging for handouts from the other passengers. Children ask for pennies. Dogs and hens surround the dining car waiting for scraps. One girl throws out chocolates— "the hard kind, that no one liked"—but the hens get them before the dogs do.

The young woman decides the lion is too expensive: three shillings and sixpence. Her husband thinks the price is preposterous also, but his wife urges him to stop bargaining with the old man. She withdraws from the window to sit in the compartment across the train's corridor. She thinks about the lion she has not purchased and all the other similar carvings she has already bought: bucks, hippos, and elephants. She wonders how these items, which have come to represent the unreality of her honeymoon trip, will fit in at home and what meaning they will take on in her everyday life. She realizes that she has been subconsciously thinking that her new husband was part of this unreality, as if he would vanish as soon as the honeymoon ends.

The bell rings in the station, and the stationmaster prepares the train to leave. As the train starts moving on the track, the old man with the lion runs alongside it, offering the carving for "one-and-six"—only a fraction of what he had asked for before. The husband tosses the money out the window and the old man throws the lion to him. As the train leaves the station, the old man is standing, holding the shilling and sixpence he has picked up from the ground.

The young man enters the compartment where his wife sits, pleased with having obtained the lion figure for so little, and hands it to her. Though she admires its finely crafted features and the ruff of fur around its neck, she holds it away from her. She is dismayed at this purchase because it represents the humiliation her husband has forced upon the old African. She demands to know why he did not pay a fair price for it. He protests that she herself had said it was too expensive. The young woman throws the lion onto the seat in frustration.

A sense of shame engulfs her as she thinks of the price. She feels an emptiness inside herself. She has felt this way before but mistakenly thought it came from being alone too much; now she knows that is not true. The empty feeling is tied up with her new husband and their differing value systems. Her husband is sprawled out on the seat and she remains with her back toward him. The abandoned lion has fallen into a corner.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

In the opening of *The Train from Rhodesia*, the author introduces a train station at an unnamed stop, where artists and merchants wait anxiously for tourists to arrive. A stationmaster walks out of his brick train station and straightens his serge uniform. The vendors, who are native to this region, prepare for the arrival of tourists. The stationmaster's barefoot children wander out of their grey mud hut. Chickens, dogs, and small children walk alongside the track. The heavy heat casts a reflection on the station. Thick sand flies through the air. The stationmaster's wife sits on her veranda, behind a mesh curtain, with a sheep carcass dangling above her head.

The approaching train is heard in the distance. The track flares out to let the old train come creaking into the station. Artists move animatedly up and down the length of the train, crouching and springing in an exhibit the author compares to "performing animals." These performers create a fantasy atmosphere which draws the tourists forward. Tourists exit the train and examine merchant goods at the station. A young woman points out a lion that is carved from wood with the details burned into it. The vendor, an old man, holds the lion up and smiles at his customer. The woman's husband examines the lion as well, pointing out its mane of real fur.

From the train, tourists shout, "How much?" Children with nothing to sell ask the passengers to give them pennies. Dogs are drawn to the smell of cooked meat and onions coming from the dining cart, and saunter over to sit beneath this section of the train. In the dining car, passengers sit two by two, drinking beer. A native man walks past the guard's van where the stationmaster's children are buying two loaves of bread for their mother. He continues to the engine where the stationmaster and driver are talking. He calls out to the two men jokingly and they turn to him and laugh. At the same time, the two children run back with the bread, through the iron gate of their home, and up the path through the garden where nothing ever grows.

Some of the passengers go back to the train to fetch money or collect travel companions to look at the vendor's products. The travelers on the train look like caged animals cut off from the outside. A girl throws the chocolate that she's just bought out to the dogs but the hens snatch it up first.

The woman examining the lion sculpture with her husband tells him to leave the item because it's too expensive. Her husband continues to barter with the vendor while she goes back on the train to sit down. She looks out the window to the opposite side of the track. There is nothing there, just sand and bush. She thinks of the carved lion and smiles. Then thinking of all the other strange items they bought on their trip, she wonders where these things will go once they are home and what the purchases will mean once they are back in reality. Even the presence of her new husband feels like something that belongs to the fantasy of the trip.

A bell rings, indicating that the train is ready to depart. The last passengers get back on the train. The stationmaster's wife looks out at the train from under the hanging carcass. The train starts slowly, while natives run alongside, trying to negotiate final sales. The old native shouts his last offer to the woman's husband, reducing the lion by almost a third. The husband fumbles through his pocket. He throws the money to the vendor and the merchant throws the lion into the train through the window.

The small children wave at the departing tourists and dogs watch the train go. The stationmaster walks slowly back to his chalet. The old native who sold the lion stands smiling with his hand open as his earnings sit in his palm. The last section of the train pulls out of the station.

Inside the train, the young woman's husband shakes his head with laughter and triumph as he shows his wife the lion and tells her what he paid for it. She looks at the lion wryly. "How could you?" she questions her husband. He sees the dismay in her face and asks her what's wrong. She asks him why he didn't just pay the original price if he wanted it so badly. He explains that he bought the lion for her because she said she wanted it. She throws the lion on the seat and stares out the window, holding her face in her hands. A feeling of shame creeps over her at how little they paid. She feels sick and weary; a familiar feeling that she had hoped would disappear once she got married. In the past, she thought the feeling was caused by being single and belonging only to herself. She sits on the train, not wanting to move, speak, or look at anything because she does not want to associate things here with negative feelings later. The woman's husband sits with his hands dropped between his legs, and the lion has fallen on its side in the corner of the seat.

Analysis

"The Train from Rhodesia" is part of an early collection of Nadine Gordimer's short fiction entitled *The Soft Voice of the Serpent and Other Stories*. It takes place during a quick train stop in a small African village. Like much of Gordimer's short fiction, *The Train from Rhodesia* expresses the social divide between middle and upper class white citizens and impoverished African natives in South Africa. One notable use of symbolism is evident in the story's title. Although the setting of the story is the train's rest stop, the title refers to the place from which the train has come. The unnamed train stop village speaks volumes of the racist, indifferent attitudes toward native African communities.

Poverty is symbolized in many ways throughout the story. As the train approaches the station, chickens and dogs run toward the track. The chickens are described as thin and underfed. At one point, a girl throws the chocolates she has just bought to the dogs. This description largely emphasizes class segregation and the dividing line carried out by apartheid, which became law in South Africa in 1947. While the people at the station are starving, a girl throws away her chocolate, a luxury, to the dogs. Another symbol of poverty is invoked by the bartering between the old native and the young white husband over a lion sculpture. The husband admits to his wife that he was only bartering for fun,

but in the end the native offers him a low price and he accepts. His wife is embarrassed that he did this. Her shame comes from the fact that she recognizes the man's poverty, but to her husband it's just game. When the train leaves, the native man stands at the station and smiles as he holds the money in his hand, symbolizing that he is simply grateful to have made a sale. The vendors at the station depend upon the tourists for their livelihoods.

Early in the story, the author uses the term "piccanins" to describe the children who run alongside the train track. This is a slang term used in South Africa for small African children, usually used by white natives. The use of this word resonates as another symbol of segregation. It gives the reader an understanding of the setting by offering hints through regional colloquialisms.

To continue with the concept of racial segregation, the author describes the view of the artists as seen by the passengers on the train. As the artists gallivant near the train, the author describes them as performing animals. The intention is to draw attention to the fantasy element of the setting and to lend an exotic feel. This may be an indication that the natives are aware of how the white passengers view them so they fulfill the tourists' expectations intentionally by acting as "performers." At the same time, Gordimer addresses the way that apartheid affects white citizens. The passengers on the train are described as "caged animals." They also are segregated. The image of the passengers peering through the glass at the station symbolizes that they are locked away from the world because of racial segregation.

Characters

Old man

The old man initially tries to sell his carved lion for three shillings and sixpence to the young couple, but fails. Later, he shouts to the young man already on the train that he will sell it for one-and-six. His acceptance of such a low price and his breath, visible "between his ribs," indicate that he is desperate and probably very poor. His polite manners, his "smiling, not from the heart, but at the customer," indicate both his dire circumstances and his dependence on tourists like the young couple. Gordimer offers little description, but indicates that he is very old, a man who murmurs, "as old people repeat things to themselves." Gordimer refers twice to his feet in the sand, thus showing the old man's connection with the land, which contrasts with the young couple who are enclosed in the train.

Stationmaster

The stationmaster appears briefly in the story. As the train approaches, he comes "out of his little brick station with its pointed chalet roof, feeling the creases in his serge uniform." His discomfort in the suit represents his attempt to fit in an unnatural role imposed on him by his job. The presence of his barefoot children and wife emphasize the poverty of the small town. When his children collect "their mother's two loaves of bread," the stationmaster's dependence on the benevolence of the train from white, European-dominated Rhodesia is emphasized.

Young man

The young man accompanies the young woman on the train. He is surprised when she declines to buy the lion from the native at the train station. Despite the woman's decision, he bargains with the old man "for fun" and then "automatically" accepts the old man's low offer of one-and-six. He throws the money to the old man and catches the lion as it is thrown to him. Whereas the young woman's conscience is torn, the young man simply seems to be enjoying his trip. Thus, with "laughter and triumph" he presents the lion to the young woman and is "shocked by the dismay of her face.' * He is finally depicted, "sitting, with his hands drooping between his sprawled legs." His silence implies an inability to understand the young woman.

Young woman

The young woman is the central character of the story, since it is her thoughts upon which the pathos of the story depends. Upon arriving at the train station, she admires a carved lion but declines to buy it, saying that the old man selling it wants too much money. When she retreats into the train, though, it is revealed that she already owns

several similar items and does not know what she will do with them once she is home. The woman becomes upset after her husband buys the lion for a few cents. "If you wanted it, why didn't you pay for it?" she asks, "Why didn't you take it decently, when he offered?" This outburst indicates that the woman feels guilty over the patronizing and demeaning way her husband has treated the old man. As the train pulls out of the station, her shame overwhelms her, and they sit in an angry silence. Their relationship has been affected by the racial injustice her husband defines as "fun, bargaining."

Gordimer reveals the thoughts of only the young woman, thereby focusing the exchange in the train station on the human toll exacted by apartheid. The woman is wealthy enough to travel in style; as a white, she is a beneficiary of the government's system of racial discrimination. Nevertheless, even as she participates willingly in an unjust society, she tries to appreciate the natives—especially for their fine artistry. When unsettling feelings overcome her, she blames them on "being alone and belonging too much" to herself. The incident on the train, however, makes her realize that she is upset by larger social issues. The starving man was made to beg for a few coins in return for an elaborately and skillfully carved animal. Yet, she remains with her back towards her husband, indicating that she is still unable to discuss the topic; she is too bound by her complicity in society.

Themes

Race and Racism

In South Africa, apartheid, the legal separation of races, became law in 1947. It is not necessary for Gordimer to mention the race of the characters in the story. Readers in the 1950s understood that the "old native" was black and the rich tourists were white. In a society so harshly divided, Gordimer writes of an instance in which the two races interact, thus revealing the patronizing attitudes of whites towards blacks and the blacks' virtual enslavement and dependency on the whites. The whites, moreover, are not native to the country; just as the train passengers are merely "tourists" in the village that exists frozen in time before and after the train leaves. The villagers are shown as belonging to the land: "the sand became the sea, and closed over the children's black feet softly and without imprint." In contrast, the white tourists are removed from nature and from the land: in their compartments with "caged faces, boxed in, cut off after the contact of outside," they are indifferent to those on the outside. The beer drinkers "looked out, as if they could not see beyond" the windows of the train. Some passengers throw scraps of food to the dogs that hover near the train, just as others throw pennies to the children. In this image, Gordimer emphasizes the effect of the whites' superior attitudes on the natives: it forces them to act like animals. That the young couple has collected tribal art on their vacation further represents their patronizing attitude towards the country's natives. The tribal objects, which have great symbolic meaning to those who make them, become nothing more than decorations in the houses of the upper, ruling class. The woman wonders "How will they look at home.... Away from the unreality of the last few weeks?" To her, a honeymoon journey through Africa seems "unreal," but to the people who live there, like the barefoot children who live in mud huts, it is very "real" indeed.

Wealth and Poverty

Enmeshed in the law of apartheid is the sharp division between wealth and poverty. While the inhabitants of the small village are so poor that they cannot afford shoes, the woman and man return to the city with bags of souvenirs that they do not know what they will do with. After picking up the coins thrown to him by the man on the train, the old man's "breath [blows] out the skin between his ribs," indicating the hunger and malnutrition prevalent in South Africa's rural areas. The stationmaster's children are depicted "clutching" a mere two loaves of bread. Meanwhile, the train passengers sit comfortably in their cabins—one woman actually gives her excess food to the dogs, ignoring the children begging at the train's windows. Desperate to make money, the merchants are reduced to acting "like performing animals, the better to exhibit the fantasy held toward the faces on the train."

Greed

The man selling the lion initially asks for "three-and-six." Though probably a fair price, the man on the train balks in an effort to get it for less. Since he and his wife already have several items like it, this bargaining is just a game to him. Thus, the impoverished seller is at the man's mercy. He needs the money more than the man needs the lion; this discrepancy becomes a prime opportunity for the young man to exhibit his greed. In waiting until the last possible moment—when the train is leaving the station—the man obtains the lion for just a fraction of its original price. He has made the poor man beg for the few coins, and he has received a finely crafted artwork for his wife. He does not recognize his greed: "I was arguing with him for fun, bargaining, " he tells his wife, oblivious to the fact that his "fun" reduced the native to "gasping, his skinny toes splaying in the sand."

Conscience

The young woman wrestles with her conscience over her appreciation for the lion and her outrage at her husband's greed in obtaining it. She represents those who are not entirely comfortable with apartheid but benefit from it anyhow. Her initial reaction to the seller's offer is "No, leave it." Though she says it is too expensive, it seems likely that she is troubled by the dichotomy of wealth and poverty the train trip has presented to her. She retreats inside the train rather than deal with the poor natives. This action represents many whites' preference for going along with the travesty of apartheid rather than deal openly with the painful issues of inequality it presents. She feels shameful and sick for exploiting the native Africans, but refuses to explain these feelings to her husband. Previously, she had attributed such feelings to being single and alone. She argues with her husband and they both end up feeling hurt and disconnected from one another. Thus, her conscience has divided them; this event illustrates how apartheid can drive a wedge between all people and even divide families. In the end, the woman rejects both her husband and the lion, which had "fallen on its side in the corner."

Style

Narrative

"The Train from Rhodesia" begins and ends with the symbol of the train. Gordimer structures her story around this metaphor and uses limited third-person narration to tell it. The narrator reveals only the thoughts of the young woman, thus focusing the story around her perspective, even though the stationmaster and his family are introduced to the reader before the train arrives. The woman's thoughts are conveyed through interruptions in Gordimer's detailed narrative. These interruptions reveal her moral questions about her husband's bargaining for the carving: "Everything was turning around inside her. One-and-six. One-and-six." That no one else's thoughts are revealed by the narrator further emphasizes the psychological distance between the woman and the other characters in the story.

Symbolism and Imagery

In a story so short, images and symbols must be chosen carefully and used efficiently if the story's themes are to be presented clearly. In "The Train from Rhodesia," the train itself is the most overt symbol. The train comes from Rhodesia, a privileged British colony in South Africa, and thus symbolizes British colonialism. "Creaking, jerking, jostling, gasping, the train filled the station," Gordimer describes it, thus imparting a view that British domination resembles a huge, mechanical, unhealthy, and overbearing beast. The train only stops briefly and few people get on or off, further symbolizing the indifference and lack of understanding inherent in British imperialism. The train moves along "the single, straight track," emphasizing the "tunnel vision" of the dominant power. The old man and his impoverished neighbors are incidental; the train is merely passing through on its way to another British outpost. As it leaves, it "cast the station like a skin," an image that imparts the idea that the village was something to be rid of, unwanted and unneeded.

In contrast to the mechanical, manufactured symbol of the train to represent the whites, the Africans of the small village are identified with images of nature. The villagers are surrounded by "sand, that lapped all around, from sky to sky, cast little rhythmical cups of shadow," and which closes over the barefoot children's feet. Furthermore, the. stationmaster's wife is identified with a sheep's carcass that is hanging over the veranda. This, also, is a symbol of nature, even though it negatively connotes their position in society as nothing more than pieces of meat. Nevertheless, these images reveal that the villagers are an organic part of the environment. When Gordimer describes the old man's feet "splaying the sand," she brings to mind a tradition in African art in which exaggeratedly large feet symbolize a connection with the land and the generations of those who have cultivated it. She contrasts this organic connection with the sterile, compartmentalized separation of the British who sit "behind glass, drinking beer, two by two, on either side of a uniform railway vase with its pale dead flower."

Sand connects the old man, the station-master and his children to each other, but the British have no symbol to connect themselves to one another beyond the loud, lumbering train that "heaved and bumped back against itself." When sand is used as an image for the young woman, however, it symbolizes the shame she feels, which "sounded in her ears like the sound of sand, pouring."

Historical Context

When Gordimer published "The Train from Rhodesia" in 1952, South African society was legally divided along racial lines by apartheid. The all-white National Party won control of the government in 1948 and dominated South African politics for much of the next two decades. Black Africans and other non-whites, including those of mixed-race heritage, were denied the most basic human rights and forced to live apart from whites in substandard living conditions. They were allowed only disproportionately small representation in government, and by 1960 they were denied all representation. This political exclusion insured a monumental divide in the respective standards of living between whites and non-whites. While whites enjoyed excellent hygiene, health care, food, education and transportation, non-whites, like the old man and the stationmaster's family in the story, suffered from malnutrition, disease, and severe poverty. In accordance with the Population Registration Act of 1950, all South Africans were divided by their race and treated accordingly. Members of each of the four established ethnic groups (Asian, African White and Coloured, or mixed-race) were strictly segregated in all aspects of their lives. Interracial sex and marriage were prohibited and the Group Areas Act of 1950 divided all cities and towns into segregated districts of both residential and business property.

In order to effect this total division, thousands of Coloureds and Indians were forced out of white areas by the government so that each district would be racially homogenous. Strict laws prohibited non-whites from sharing the same trains, buses, taxis, or even hearses as whites. For these reasons, none of the black Africans boarded the train to Rhodesia in the story. While the white population prospered in wealthy urban areas like Rhodesia, the non-white population suffered economic and political exploitation in the rest of the country, such as the rural area Gordimer describes. Non-whites were only allowed in the all-white districts to work and were required to return directly to their districts afterwards. While white children learned to read at very early ages, most black South Africans remained illiterate. In 1953, the white South African government even outlawed missionary schools so that it could control native Africans' educations.

However, by 1950, resistance to apartheid was growing. At this time, the African National Congress gained members under the leadership of President Albert Lutuli and his companions, Oliver Tambo, and Nelson Mandela. While the white-controlled government sought to crush such resistance movements through violence, surveillance, and sometimes assassination, the African National Congress continued to exist even after it was outlawed and its leaders, including Mandela, were imprisoned. The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 allowed the police to arrest anyone without the right to a lawyer, a trial, or an appeal. These laws were used to punish demonstrators in 1952, when they protested laws that even the South African Supreme Court had declared racist. Leaders of the resistance vowed that the illegal political protests would continue until all of the country's jails were overcrowded. In response to this, the South African Parliament extended dictatorial powers to Prime Minister Daniel F. Malan in 1953. The resulting police state took the lives of many bright young political leaders and

caused guerrilla warfare that characterized South African politics until the early 1990s, when apartheid was dismantled.

Critical Overview

When Gordimer published "The Train from Rhodesia" in 1952, overt criticism of South Africa's political system by writers often resulted in censorship of their works. Thus, the story was Gordimer's subtle attempt to illustrate the insidious ramifications of racial discrimination. While she had already published many short stories in literary magazines, her readership was limited to a small audience of liberal, white South Africans. Internationally, her condemnation of apartheid gained her respect, but her second novel, *A World of Strangers*, was banned by the South African government. Yet even as her critics attacked her politics, others praised her technical mastery of language, her fluid imagery, and natural characterizations. "The Train from Rhodesia" itself, however, received little attention from critics upon its publication.

The volatile racial tensions in South Africa have continued to affect the reception of Gordimer's literature throughout her career. Many critics have attempted to categorize Gordiraer as a political writer, though she has resisted this label. She has always maintained that her writing is first about people and that she seeks to speak honestly and creatively about people's lives, not politics. Though admitting that writing can have radical effects on people's lives, Gordimer argues that one should focus on the writing itself when writing, and not think of one's audience. Intentionally writing propaganda, she says, would destroy the aesthetic merit of her work. Many critics apparently concur, since Gordimer received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991, for "her magnificent epic writing [which] has been of very great benefit to humanity." A few critics steadfastly maintain that downplaying the politics of her stories is an evasion of her political responsibility. The South African government, however, disagrees; her 1966 novel *The Late Bourgeois World v/as* banned for twelve years.

Contemporary scholars respect the strategy of Gordimer's fiction. According to scholars like John Cooke, who wrote *The Novels ofNadine Gordimer; Private Lives, Public Landscapes*, and Stephen Clingman, who wrote *History from the Inside: The Novels ofNadine Gordimer*, Gordimer's fiction tells the stories of vast social change through the everyday experiences of individuals. Because Gordimer has chosen to write about the small moments in people's lives, like those in "The Train from Rhodesia," her writing receives almost a universal warm welcome today. This is in contrast with the 1950s and 1960s, when such "small moments" were sometimes criticized as both didactic and unpolitical. In the 1950s and 1960s, many critics and readers preferred stories that stressed national politicians and prominent leaders over the dailiness of life. Today, in light of the trend towards minimalism in fiction, "small moments" are almost universally acknowledged to be suitable topics for literature. Reviewing *A Soldier's Embrace*, Edith Milton writes, "Gordimer is no reformer; she looks beyond political and social outrage to the sad contradiction of the human spirit."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Rena Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the representative characteristics of Gordimer's writing that are apparent in "The Train from Rhodesia."

Nadine Gordimer has been called South Africa's "First Lady of Letters," and she is perhaps that country's most distinguished living fiction writer. The author of many volumes of collected short stories and novels, in addition to numerous lectures, essays, and other works of nonfiction, Gordimer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991. This international recognition of Gordimer's work not only confirmed her reputation as an artist, but it also stressed the importance of writing about the effects of apartheid on the people of South Africa, The length of Gordimer's career—she published her first story when she was thirteen, her first book at twenty-six—has allowed her to document the changes in South African society over the course of several generations.

Throughout her career, Gordimer has insisted that because politics affect all aspects of life, her writing always deals either directly or indirectly with political matters. Moreover, she believes that only the truth can help a good cause. More directly, she believes that her writing deals with the truth, thus she makes no attempt to espouse specific political views regarding South Africa. Taking this view, Gordimer often sees herself as isolated between the external world of politics and the internal world of the individual. Her work reflects this sense of detachment, and Gordimer has been admires by some and criticized by others for it. Likewise, some critics feel that Gordimer does not take a strong enough stand against racism, and others feel that she goes too far. The South African government, for example, has banned several of her works, and sometimes prevents others from being published in paperback, which is the only way many black South Africans could afford her novels.

Gordimer's fiction has been the subject of much commentary in South Africa over the years. One review of *A World of Strangers*, Gordimer's second novel, complains that she writes of "the wider and more dangerous pastures of the sociological novel," A reviewer of her next novel, *Occasion for Loving*, which concerns an affair between a white English woman and a black South African man, insists that "the theme and incidents of the story will seem less important than those stretches of interior writing in which the author's still, small voice is heard above the sounds of ordinary living and the common day." It is not surprising that the most passionate analysis of Gordimer's work and the most hostile reactions generally come from other South Africans or ex-Africans. Gordimer's position, that of the white South African opposing apartheid—a minority within a minority—has led to strong emotions and occasional suppression.

The Atlantic Monthly has called Gordimer "one of the most gifted practitioners of the short story anywhere in English," and it was her short stories that first led critics to consider her a major writer. Her talent for short fiction has been compared to that of the

poet, particularly for her interweaving of event, meaning, and symbol in a short amount of space. Martin Trump also points out that Gordimer depicts how women as well as Africans have suffered from the inequality present in South African society. Racial inequality, since it permeates all facets of life, is always present in her stories, despite the race and social class of her characters.

"The Train from Rhodesia," one of Gordimer's early stories, concerns a young couple on a train stopped at a rural station. The young woman is interested in a carved lion an old black man has to sell but claims the price is too high. Her husband bargains with the vendor and obtains the carving for an unfairly low price, causing his wife to feel humiliated and isolated from him. At first, this story may not seem to deal with the racial problems specific to South Africa—after all, oppressed and impoverished people are taken advantage of the world over. But the inequality that permeates South African society is depicted in the shared humiliation of the old black man and the young white woman. Gordimer explained this relationship in an interview: the young woman "suffered from seeing her husband or lover demean himself by falling into this black-white cliche of beating down the African.... She suffered really from seeing herself demeaned through her lover."

The woman identifies with the black carver and thus rejects, at least for the moment, the typical white world of South Africa. Gordimer achieves this emotional connection in part through symbolism. While she draws distinctions between the white world of the train and the black world of the station, she implies that the black world is more honest. The whites live in a fragile world of their own construction symbolized by the train. Before they buy the blacks' wares, the whites require them to act "like performing animals, the better to exhibit the fantasy held towards the faces on the train." Though the black world is filled with "mud huts," "barefoot children," and "a garden in which nothing grew," it is still shown as a place of community. This is in contrast this with the passengers on the train with their "caged faces" and who are "boxed in." They are willing to donate items to the poor children outside but only those they do not value, such as the chocolate that "wasn't very nice."

Such an incident illustrates the unfruitful match between the young man and woman on the train. The couple, presumably on their honeymoon, have been caught up in "the unreality of the last few weeks." They have bought many animal carvings during their travels, and the young woman wonders how they will fit in at home. The buck, hippos, and elephants (and later, the lion), all ferocious or frightening animals, stand in opposition to the refined world she and her husband inhabit. But after seeing her husband act in such an insensitive, exploitative manner toward the old black man, she knows that nothing she has recently acquired is in harmony with her life and values. Her husband, however, confronted with the dichotomy of the white and black worlds of South African has no problem accepting it.

The emptiness she feels at this realization of the differences between them fills her with a "weariness" and "tastelessness." The woman has felt this way before, but she has mistakenly thought "it was something to do with singleness, with being alone and belonging too much to oneself." The incident at the train station makes her painfully

aware that this "void" has been caused by her alliance with her husband, who argues with an impoverished old vendor "for fun." Yet she does not voice these frustrations to him. Though the woman does not want to have anything to associate with this emptiness, so that "no object, word or sight.. .might recur and so recall the feeling," it will clearly not be possible to ignore their basic incompatibility in the future. The man's failure to understand his wife's unspoken signals reveals their fundamental inability to communicate. Thus, he misses "the occasion for loving."

In addition to developing the theme of sterile love through her characters' actions towards one another, Gordimer also uses sexual imagery and symbolism. As the story begins, the train entering the station represents the potential for a healthy relationship. The train represents the man; it "[flares] out.... Creaking, jerking... gasping, the train fills the station." The woman is the station, whose tracks "[flare] out to let it in." But, like the doubts that have been lurking in the back of the young woman's mind, there are hints of the impending division: the train behind the engine is a "dwindling body"; the train calls out "I'm coming" but receives "no answer." The sexual promise of the relationship is snuffed out by the husband's purchase of the lion. As the train leaves the station, the young woman then feels the "impotence of anger," and the "heat of shame [mounts] through her legs." Finally, the train casts "the station like a skin." Once again it calls "I'm coming," and receives no reply. Thus, through this metaphor, Gordimer indicates the young couple's emotional estrangement.

Gordimer's reputation as a descriptive writer rests not on her portrayal of details such as eye color or hair color but in the layering of telling details. In the 1980s, Gordimer and photographer David Goldblatt collaborated on two books in which selections from her fiction were accompanied by his pictures. Andrew Vogel Ettin finds these artists to be well matched in their interest of social and physical environments. Goldblatt does not illustrate Gordimer's words per se but shows the backdrop against which her stories take place, Ettin draws particular attention to the final image of the couple in' "The Train from Rhodesia" as an example of the "expressive power of the physical": "Smuts blew in grittily, settled on her hands. Her back remained at exactly the same angle, turned against the young man sitting with his hands drooping between his sprawled legs, and the lion, fallen on its side in the corner." This "caught moment" deserves its place as the pinnacle of the story. It includes many elements central to Gordimer's fiction: the intrusion of the white world of the train in the black world of the station, the separation of man and woman, and the chance for love destroyed by the racial problems of South Africa.

Source: Rena Korb, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

David Kippen is an educator and specialist on British colonial literature and twentieth-century South African fiction. In the following essay, he discusses the symbolism of location and geography in "The Train from Rhodesia" and how it underscores the silence and symmetry of the narrative.

In one of the more insightful recent discussions of Nadine Gordimer's "The Train from Rhodesia," South African critic Robert Green writes in *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer* that the story "map[s] out the silence and asymmetry between black and white." There is much to recommend using these ideas of "silence" and "asymmetry" as points of departure into Gordimer's story. The building blocks Gordimer selects for her setting—the station, the train, and her principal characters—provide context essential to the story's action. If the silence between the domains of black and white is most evident in the unfolding of Gordimer's plot, it is in the construction of setting that the asymmetry Green remarks upon can be most clearly seen. Since the asymmetry between these domains generates the silence which mark their boundaries, it is here, with setting, that I shall begin.

Though it is impossible to date the story's action with certainty, it is reasonable to assume that it is set sometime between the closing years of the nineteenth century, when the first major train lines linking South Africa with countries to the north were built, and 1953. However, given the political events of the late 1940s and early 1950s, a later date seems more likely. The exact location of the station cannot be established with any certainty, but Gordimer's descriptions of the hot, arid, desert-like conditions suggest a setting on either the Little or Great Karoo (Khoisan for "desert") in the Cape Colony. Gordimer could, of course, have chosen to be more specific about the location and date if she had wished, but it is precisely the approximate nature of these details that gives her story the sense of an endlessly recurring cycle. It is worth observing that, although her other works generally provide very detailed scenes, here she furnishes only a few details about the station and the train. From Gordimer's description one might take away the impression that all of South Africa is similarly arid and empty, but this is not so. Though the country's interior is largely arid, the Eastern and Southern coast are as fertile, well-watered, pleasant and densely populated as the United States' Gulf Coast. Why, then, does she pick this location? Her decision to place the story's action in the Karoo is most probably both a strategic move and a practical necessity, for it is in locations such as this one that the disparity between the worlds of black and white are visible in their simplest, most direct relief. This is not to say that there is no disparity in coastal South Africa—the opposite was, and remains, the case—but rather, that the Karoo setting provides an ideal territory for a study in miniature of three tiers of South African society.

In this hierarchy, the polished, well-to-do English-speaking people appear both on top economically and as social transients on the landscape ("settler," with its implication of transience, is a term of insult to many South African whites). Their presence on the train therefore provides a setting which is both entirely plausible and a wonderfully ironic

commentary on their presence on this landscape. Where the station is a study in degrees of poverty, the train is a demonstration of the world's opulence elsewhere, a caravan of delights from which the stationmaster's family is in exile, and from which the station's blacks are permanently excluded. This fact is mirrored spatially as well, with the passengers up high, reaching down to toss money or examine artifacts.

In a letter of November 5, 1899, a young Winston Churchill, on his way to report on the Boer War (1899-1902) wrote that "railway traveling in South Africa is more expensive but just as comfortable as in India. Lying-down accommodation is provided for all.... The sun is warm, and the air is keen and delicious. But the scenery would depress the most buoyant spirits.... with the daylight the train was in the middle of the Great Karoo. Wherefore was this miserable land of stone and scrub created?" Churchill's comments underscore the dichotomy between the harsh, unpleasant conditions outside on one hand, and the train's self-contained opulence on the other. From the perspective of the station, the train's call of "I'm coming" represents an unanswerable, false promise. At the story's end the train removes from the barren station everything it brought. Shedding the station like a snake sheds its used-up skin, it leaves behind only some bread, some pocket-change, an orange and some candies that are "not very nice."

Gordimer provides little detail about the newly married couple beyond suggesting that they are honeymooning and that they are not themselves from southern Africa. The young wife's comments about "the unreality of the last few weeks," the difficulty of finding places "at home" to put the carvings and baskets they have thus far bought on their trip, and the changing meaning of these things "away from the places [she] found them" suggest that the honeymooners are not themselves Rhodesian, but are touring Africa and, like Churchill, will return to Britain when their honeymoon is over. (Rhodesia, which lies directly north of South Africa, was a British colony until November 12th, 1965. The name change to Zimbabwe took place in 1980.)

On the next rung down from the transients on the train is a somewhat cliched depiction of the stalwart Afrikaner family, carving out a niche from the unforgiving country. Like the principal characters the stationmaster remains nameless, but his social rank is nonetheless clearly identified. His uniform is rumpled and creased. His house is made of tin. A sheep carcass hangs in the verandah. His children wander around barefoot. His garden grows nothing. Taken together, these points mean to demonstrate that the stationmaster and his family are from the poorest part of South Africa's white working class, not coincidentally, the group in the most direct competition with blacks for unskilled positions. (David Harrison writes in The White Tribe of Africa that "between 1924 and 1933 the proportion of unskilled white workers on the railways rose from 9.5.. .to 39.9 % while the proportion of blacks fell from 75.. .to 48.9%.")

At this early stage in her career Gordimer fails to get much closer to the station's black inhabitants than her heroine does. However, the details she provides from a distance demonstrate that their lives of unpleasant, undignified dependency are in as sharp a contrast to the relative well-being of the stationmaster and his family as they are to the idealized, mythical Africa they sell—the Africa of woven baskets, of carved buck, of "lions.. .grappling with strange, thin, elongated warriors who clutched spears and

showed no fear." This is, in the protagonist's words, "the fantasy" of a world in balance, a world in which blacks live dignified lives in harmony with the world they inhabit, a world in which there is no asymmetry between hunter and hunted or between black and white. But beyond the fantasy they sell is a very different reality, one in which the black majority accommodate themselves however they can while they mourn, mythologize, and commercialize their heritage for British consumption. The station, then, is a self-contained economic world, consisting only of the stationmaster's house, a goods store, and an adjacent *kraal. (*Similar to "corral," the Afrikaans kraal also describes a small group of huts within the wall).

Together, these locations suggest an entirely artificial micro-economy, subject to the passing trains for continuance. The stationmaster and his wife buy goods to sell to the blacks living in the adjacent kraal. The blacks, in turn, have no recourse but to carve and weave artifacts to sell to train passengers in order to buy goods from the station-master's store. Until the arrival of this particular train, the system remains asymmetrical, static, timeless. This imbalance of power is the principal asymmetry from which all others arise. There is, without truly representative government, no mechanism to allow the blacks at the base of the economic pyramid to invert the structures of power and race, nor is there any incentive for the white minority to let go of their franchise and make the government representative.

The story's plot sets this stasis in motion. It details how an artfully carved lion reaches across the barriers of race, class and silence that separate the domains, of white and black South Africans—a disarmingly simple theme. However, this simple theme supports a complex and nuanced rising awareness on the part of the female protagonist. Ultimately, her rejection of her new husband powerfully demonstrates the impossibility of living "outside" incompatible ideologies. Though the young woman is certainly not intentionally looking for opportunities to mingle with the natives, the old man smiles "not from the heart, but at the customer." His carving "speaks" to her in a different language, uncomfortably bridging the chasm of silence between the domains of black and white South Africa. Its mane "tellfs] you... that the artist had delight in the lion." It is this "delight," by the story's conclusion, that makes the young woman unable to quell her awareness of the humanity that she and the woodcarver share. The protagonist senses that a moral wrong has been done, but she is certainly unwilling, perhaps even unable, to understand the origin of her disquiet. In a pointed, ironic commentary on the relativity of values aesthetic systems, the woman is outraged, not because her husband meanly cheated another man out of a ridiculously small amount of change, but that he did so for a lion that was pretty, suggesting that the real victim is the undervalued artwork, not the old man standing by the railroad panting. (The lion's price, whether three-or one-and six shillings is ridiculously low by any standard. Gordimer underscores this by withholding the key word "shilling" until nearly the end of the story, inviting the reader to substitute the basic South African currency unit "rand" in its place.) So threatening are the possibilities in every direction—on one hand, that the carver is as human as she is; on the other, that she can no longer respect her husband—that the protagonist is gradually squeezed into a state of emotional paralysis. Handled by a ham-fisted author this approach would have led the protagonist to buy the lion, make more contact with the man, and reach back across the divide in sudden, blinding

self-awareness. But Gordimer avoids such sentimentality, instead following her protagonist from the stasis of the external setting to the paralysis of limited self-awareness while leading the reader along the contours of race, class, and culture that defined South Africa at the outset *of apartheid*, and, to some measure, continue to define it today.

Source: David Kippen, for *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, originally written as a foreword to her collection, Selected Stories, Gordimer outlines her philosophy of short story writing. "The Train from Rhodesia" is included in the collection.

After I had selected and arranged these stones, the present publisher asked me to provide some kind of introduction to them. If they were now making their first appearance I might have recoiled from this invitation, but they have all been printed and some reprinted, and have therefore been through a period of probation. Whatever I may say about them now cannot alter what has been said by others, and can hardly increase or lessen the likelihood of their being read—-that must depend on the stones themselves

The words are William Plomer's, but the attitude comes so close to my own that I do not hesitate to fly his declaration at the masthead of this book. William Plomer not only wrote some stories that have become classic, he also had a special interest in and fascination with the short story as a form used in widely diverse ways by others. His code holds good forme; for all of us. I take it further; if the story itself does not succeed in conveying all the writer meant it should, no matter when he wrote it, neither explication nor afterthought can change this. Conversely, if the story has been achieved, the patronizing backward glance its writer might cast upon it, as something he could now do with one hand tied behind his back but no longer would care to do at all, will not detract from it.

I wrote these stories [in *Selected Stories*] over thirty years. I have attempted now to influence any reader's judgment of or pleasure in them only to the extent implied by the fact that I have chosen some and excluded others. In this sense, I suppose, I have 'rewritten': imposed a certain form, shaped by retrospect, upon the collection as an entity. For everything one writes is part of the whole story, so far as any individual writer attempts to build the pattern of his own perception out of chaos. To make sense of life: that story, in which everything, novels, stories, the false starts, the half-completed, the abandoned, has its meaningful place, will be complete with the last sentence written before one dies or imagination atrophies. As for retrospect as a valid critique, I realize it has no fixed existence but represents my own constantly changing effort to teach myself how to make out of words a total form for whatever content I seize upon. This I understood only too clearly when I was obliged to read through my five existing collections of stories and saw how there are some stories I have gone on writing, again and again, all my life, not so much because the themes are obsessional but because I found other ways to take hold of them; because I hoped to make the revelation of new perceptions through the different techniques these demanded. I felt for the touch that would release the spring that shuts off appearance from reality. If I were to make a choice of my stories in five years' time, I might choose a different selection, in the light of what I might have learnt about these things by then. My 'retrospect* would be based upon which stories approached most nearly what I happened to have most recently taught myself. That is inevitable.

Why write short stories?

The question implies the larger one: what makes one write? Both have brought answers from experts who study writers as a psychological and social phenomenon. It is easier and more comforting to be explained than to try and explain oneself. Both have also brought answers of a kind from many writers; devious answers; as mine may be. (If one found out exactly how one walks the tightrope, would one fall immediately?) Some have lived—or died—to contradict their own theories; Ernest Hemingway said we write out our sicknesses in books, and shot himself. Of course I find I agree with those writers whose theories coincide at least in part with mine. What is experienced as solitude (and too quickly dubbed alienation) is pretty generally agreed to be a common condition conducive to becoming a writer. Octavio Paz speaks of the 'double solitude', as an intellectual and a woman, of the famous early Spanish-American writer, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz. Growing up in a gold-mining town in South Africa as a member of a white minority, to begin with, my particular solitude as an intellectual-by-inclination was so complete I did not even know I was one: the concept 'intellectual', gathered from reading, belonged as categorically to the Northern Hemisphere as a snowy Christmas. Certainly there must have been other people who were intellectuals, but they no doubt accepted their isolation too philosophically to give a signal they scarcely hoped would be answered, let alone attract an acolyte. As for the specific solitude of the woman-as-intellectual, I must say, truthfully that my femininity has never constituted any special kind of solitude, for me. Indeed, in that small town, walled up among the mine dumps, born exiled from the European world of ideas, ignorant that such a world existed among Africans, my only genuine and innocent connection with the social life of the town (in the sense that I was not pretending to be what I was not, forever hiding the activities of mind and imagination which must be suspect, must be concealed) was through my femaleness. As an adolescent, at least I felt and followed sexual attraction in common with others; that was a form of communion I could share. Rapunzel's hair is the right metaphor for this femininity: by means of it, I was able to let myself out and live in the body, with others, as well as— alone—in the mind. To be young and in the sun; my experience of this was similar to that of Camus, although I did not enter into it as fully as he did, I did not play football... .

In any case, I question the existence of the specific solitude of woman-as-intellectual when that woman is a writer, because when it comes to their essential faculty as writers, all writers are androgynous beings.

The difference between alienation and solitude should be clear enough. Writers' needs in this respect are less clear, and certainly less well and honestly understood, even by themselves. Some form of solitude (there are writers who are said to find it in a crowded cafe, or less romantically among the cockroaches in a night-time family kitchen, others who must have a cabin in the woods) is the condition of creation. The less serious—shall we say professional?—form of alienation follows inevitably. It is very different from the kind of serious psychic rupture between the writer and his society that has occurred in the Soviet Union and in South Africa, for example, and that I shall not discuss here, since it requires a study in itself.

I believe—I know (there are not many things I should care to dogmatize about, on the subject of writing) that writers need solitude, and seek alienation of a kind every day of their working lives. (And remember, they are not even aware when and when not they are working...) Powers of observation heightened beyond the normal imply extraordinary disinvolvement; or rather the double process, excessive preoccupation and identification with the lives of others, and at the same time a monstrous detachment. For identification brings the superficial loyalties (that is, to the self) of concealment and privacy, while detachment brings the harsher fidelities (to the truth about the self) of revealment and exposure. The tension between standing apart and being fully involved; that is what makes a writer. That is where we begin. The validity of this dialectic is the synthesis of revelation; our achievement of, or even attempt at this is the moral, the human justification for what we do.

Here I am referring to an accusation that every writer meets, that we 'use' people, or rather other people's lives. Of course we do. As unconscious eternal eavesdroppers and observers, snoopers, nothing that is human is alien to the imagination and the particular intuition to which it is a trance-like state of entry. I have written from the starting-point of other people's 'real' lives; what I have written represents alternatives to the development of a life as it was formed before I encountered it and as it will continue, out of my sight. A writer sees in your life what you do not. That is why people who think they recognize themselves as 'models' for this character or that in a story will protest triumphantly, 'it wasn't that way at all'. They think they know better; but perhaps it is the novelist or short story writer who does? Fiction is a way of exploring possibilities present but undreamt of in the living of a single life.

There is also the assumption, sometimes prurient or deliciously scandalized, that writers write only about themselves. I know that I have used my own life much the same way as I have that of others: events (emotions are events, too, of the spirit) mark exits and entrances in a warren where many burrows lead off into the same darkness but this one might debouch far distant from that. What emerges most often is an alternative fate, the predisposition to which exists in what 'actually' happened.

How can the eavesdropper, observer, snooper ever be the prototype? The stories in this book were written between the ages of twenty and fifty. Where am I, in them? I search for myself. At most, reading them over for the first time in many years, I see my own shadow dancing on a wall behind and over certain stories. I can make a guess at remembering what significatory event it was that casts it there. The story's 'truth' or lack of it is not attached to or dependent upon that lost event.

But part of these stories "truth' does depend upon faithfulness to another series of lost events— the shifts in social attitudes as evidenced in the characters and situations. I had wanted to arrange the selection in sequence from the earliest story collection to the latest simply because when reading story collections I myself enjoy following the development of a writer. Then I found that this order had another logicto which my first was complementary. The chronological order turns out to be an historical one. The change in social attitudes unconsciously reflected in the stories represents both that of the people in my society—that is to say, history—and my apprehension of it; in the

writing, I am acting upon my society, and in the manner of my apprehension, all the time history is acting upon me....

What I am saying is that I see that many of these stories could not have been written later or earlier than they were. If I could have juggled them around in the contents list of this collection without that being evident, they would have been false in some way important to me as a writer.

What I am also saying, then, is that in a certain sense a writer is 'selected' by his subject —his subject being the consciousness of his own era. How he deals with this is, to me, the fundament of commitment, although 'commitment' is usually understood as the reverse process: a writer's selection of a subject in conformity with the rationalization of his own ideological and/or political beliefs.

My time and place have been twentieth-century Africa. Emerging from it, immersed in it, the first form in which I wrote was the short story. I write fewer and fewer stories, now, and more novels, but I don't think I shall ever stop writing stories. What makes a writer turn from one to the other? How do they differ?

Nobody has ever succeeded in defining a short story in a manner to satisfy all who write or read them, and I shall not, here. I sometimes wonder if one shouldn't simply state flatly: a short story is a piece of fiction short enough to be read at one sitting? No, that will satisfy no one, least myself. But for me certainly there is a clue, there, to the choice of the short story by writers, as a form: whether or not it has a narrative in the external or internal sense, whether it sprawls or neatly bites its own tail, a short story is a concept that the writer can 'hold', fully realized, in his imagination, at one time. A novel is, by comparison, staked out, and must be taken possession of stage by stage; it is impossible to contain, all at once, the proliferation of concepts it ultimately may use. For this reason I cannot understand how people can suppose one makes a conscious choice, after knowing what one wants to write about, between writing a novel or a short story. A short story occurs, in the imaginative sense. To write one is to express from a situation in the exterior or interior world the life-giving drop— sweat, tear, semen, saliva —that will spread an intensity on the page; burn a hole in it.

Source: Nadine Gordimer, an introduction to *Selected Stories*, 1975. Reprint by the Viking Press, 1976, pp. 9-14.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Gullason discusses the categorization of the short story as a second-class citizen of literature, but offers evidence that as a form it is deserving of much more. By way of example, he discusses Gordimer's "The Train from Rhodesia."

.. .What must we do so that the short story can receive the kind of consideration it deserves? We can try to rid the genre of the prejudices that have conspired against it. We can come to it as though it were a fresh discovery. We can settle on one term for the medium, like "short fiction" or "short story." References to names like "anecdote," "tale," "narrative," "sketch," though convenient, merely add to the confusion and suggest indecision and a possible inferiority complex. Too many names attached to the short story have made it seem almost nameless. Even the provincial attitude of teachers and anthologists has not helped. Most often students are fed on a strict diet of British and American short-story writers. But the short story is not solely a British and American product; it is an international art form, and Continental as well as Oriental, and other authors should be more fully represented in any educational program. As Maurice Beebe reminds us, "Once translated, Zola, Mann, Proust, Kafka become authors in English and American literature-----" Once this philosophy is accepted, the short story will automatically increase in vitality and stature....

A more modern illustration ... is South Africa's Nadine Gordimer in her 2400-word story "The Train from Rhodesia" (1949). What one discovers with this example is that even extreme brevity cannot stifle the short story. "The Train from Rhodesia" is a puzzling story, for Miss Gordimer is trying to say far more than she reveals on the surface. One sees that she is in a world of censorship, the possible loss of a passport, and possible imprisonment and therefore sends cryptic notes from underground. Miss Gordimer's art is the poetic art of ellipsis—much has been omitted; the reader must fill in.

What Miss Gordimer has done is to take a brief space of time and lives and make it suggest a large panorama of feelings and attitudes. For in the story we see the separateness of black and white, and white and white, the world of primitivism (suggested by the hunk of sheep's carcass dangling in a current of air) and civilization (suggested by the train and its inhabitants), and hunger (suggested by the piccanins and the animals) versus sloth (suggested by occupants of the train, who throw out chocolates). The train expands these various threads. For one, the train is from Rhodesia and is to be burdened with white and native problems. In the opening of the story we hear: the "train came out of the red horizon and bore down toward them...." Before the train stops in the station, it "called out, along the sky; but there was no answer; and the cry hung on: "I'm coming ... I'm coming...." The last paragraph of the story returns to the train and extends its meaning:' "The train had cast the station like a skin. It called out to the sky, I'm coming, I'm coming, I'm coming; and again, there was no answer."

The specific actions lead us to the generalizations made above. The pitiful natives smile not "from the heart, but at the customer." Their primitive art, like the carved lion, is

"majestic," but they as vendors are bent "like performing animals." The old vendor who sells his art work to the young husband for one-and-six has his opened palm "held in the attitude of receiving." The crisis of husband and wife at the story's end is not resolved; it merges with the tempo—gnarled, fierce, disconnected—of the humanized train which expands and heightens the various estrangements. In one place, the wife reflects: "How will they [the native goods] look at home? Where will you put them? What will they mean away from the places you found them? Away from the unreality of the last few weeks? The man outside. But he is not part of the unreality; he is for good now. Odd... somewhere there was an idea that he, that living with him, was part of the holiday, the strange places." This private reflection becomes a public estrangement with her husband: "If you wanted the thing [the carved lion] ... why didn't you buy it in the first place? If you wanted it, why didn't you pay for it? Why didn't you take it decently, when he offered if Why did you have to wait for him to run after the train with it, and give him one-and-six? One-and-six!" The wife returns to her private world: "She had thought it was something to do with singleness, with being alone and belonging too much to oneself." The train's choric chant at the end—"I'm coming, I'm coming; and again, there was no answer"—helps to magnify a world of loneliness, separation, and discord.

... [This] story defies the rules: Its action is small; its meanings are large. It is a poetic story— even more important, an impressionistic painting, for Miss Gordimer wants us to see and to feel the world of Africa through this one incident. The incident is not closed; there are the after effects, nothing is finished off, the problem still exists....

The novelist has been called the "long-distance runner," and he is not lonely. The short-story writer has been called a "sprinter," and he is lonely. Carlos Baker's reading of Hemingway's short stories is penetrating, as he uses Hemingway's own statement to explain the depths of the form. "The dignity of movement of an iceberg," Hemingway once said, "is due to only one-eighth of it being above water." Many of our great modern short-story writers write in shorthand; and one word, a phrase, can raise the short story to a new level of meaning. There is dignity and hidden depth in the short story. It has been in a deep freeze too long. One looks forward to a thawing out period.

Source: Thomas H. Gullason, "The Short Story- An Underrated Art," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Fall, 1964, pp 13-31.

Topics for Further Study

How would "The Train from Rhodesia" be different if told from the perspective of the old man? The young man?

Investigate how contemporary South Africa differs from the apartheid South Africa of 1952. Could a situation like that in "The Train from Rhodesia" take place there today?

Research the art of the indigenous Africans. What were the carved figures like those in the story used for? What were some features common to them and what did they symbolize?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: Black South Africans cannot vote, represent themselves in government, or live in the same areas as white South Africans.

1990s: Black South Africans participate in the South African government, vote, and maintain the same legal rights as white South Africans, though vast ghetto areas like Soweto still exist.

1964: Nelson Mandela is arrested by the South African government and imprisoned for treason after nearly two decades of work for the African National Congress.

1996: South African President Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress-dominated parliament approve a new, more egalitarian constitution for South Africa, with former president Frederick W. de Klerk acting as Mandela's deputy. The new constitution outlaws the death penalty, grants protection to striking workers, and provides greater access to public documents.

1953: James Baldwin publishes *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and Ralph Ellison publishes *The Invisible Man*, both seminal works on the theme of racial prejudice.

1997: The popularity of Oprah Winfrey's book club results in the skyrocketing sales of Toni Morrison's books.

What Do I Read Next?

A Guest of Honor (1990) fay Nadine Gordimer. An idealistic colonel's discovery of corruption among the leaders of a newly independent African nation results in his assassination.

"Children of the Sea," (1993) by Edwidge Danticat. A young couple are separated by a dictatorial regime in Haiti, forcing the young man to make a dangerous boat crossing to the United States.

"Vengeful Creditor" (1971) by Chinua Achebe. A story about a wealthy Nigerian's brush with free public education, which makes it difficult for her to find suitable servants to care for her children.

"Blues Ain't No Mocking Bird" (1972) by Toni Cade Bambara. A poor, African-American family is approached by a crew of filmmakers who want to shoot footage of their modest home for their project on the government food stamp program.

"Everyday Use" (1973) by Alice Walker. An African-American family's successful, college-educated daughter wants possession of the family crazy quilt so she can hang it over her sofa as an example of American folk art.

Fools and Other Stories (1983) by Njabulo Ndebele, a former leader of the Congress of South African Writers. A collection of stories that explores the lives of South African children growing up in the 1960s.

Cry, the Beloved Country (1948) by South African writer Alan Paton, a classic novel that follows Reverend Steven Kamalo through the black ghettos of Johannesburg on a search for his lost son.

Biko by Donald Woods recounts the dynamic life of Stephen Biko, South African Black Consciousness Movement leader, who was battered to death while under police interrogation in 1977.

Further Study

Haugh, *Robert F. Nadine Gordimer*, Twayne, 1974, 174 p.

Haugh discusses the body of Gordimer's work and her talents as a wnter.

Herbert, Michael. "The Train from Rhodesia," m*Reference Guide to Short Fiction*, edited by Noelle Watson, St James Press, 1994, p. 937-38.

Includes essays on both Gordimer and "The Train from Rhodesia," concentrating on their literary significance.

Huggan, Graham. "Echoes from Elsewhere: Gordimer's Short Fiction as Social Critique," in *Research in African Literature Spring*, 1994.

Huggan discusses Gordimer's works of self-criticism and her conviction that the short story is a particularly relevant and effective genre. This essay focuses on several stories, including "Six Feet of the Country," "A Company of Old Laughing Faces," "Livingstone's Companions" and "Keeping Fit"

Smith, Rowland. Introduction to Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer, from the Critical Essays on *World Literature Series*, G.K. Hall, 1990, pp 1-22.

Smith presents a detailed overview of South African and international responses to the work of Nadine Gordimer, and chronicles how they have changed in the decades she has been writing.

Terkel, Studs. "Conversations with Nadine Gordimer," in *Perspective on Ideals and the Arts*,No\ 12,No. 3,May 1963, pp 42-49.

An interview with Gordimer in which the author discusses the viewpoint of the young woman in "The Train From Rhodesia."

Wade, Michael. *Nadine Gordimer*, Evans, 1976.

Wade examines novels like The Lying Days, A Occasion for Loving and The Conservationist thoroughly, and refers briefly to her short stones.

Bibliography

Chngman, Stephen R. The Novels of Nadine Gordimer History from the Inside, *Allen & Unwin*, 1988.

Cooke, John. The Novels of Nadine Gordimer Private Lives/Public Landscapes, *Louisiana State University Press*, 1985,235 p.

Ettin, Andrew Vogel Betrayals of the Body Politic, *University Press of Virginia*, 1992,150 p.

Harrison, David. The White Tribe of Africa, *University of California Press,* 1981.

Trump, Martin. "The Short Fiction of Nadine Gordimer," in *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 17, No. 3, Fall, 1986, pp. 341-66.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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