**The Train From Rhodesia Summary**

“The Train from Rhodesia” (1952) is one of Nobel Prize winning author Nadine Gordimer’s earliest published short stories. It appeared in her debut work, The Soft Voice of the Serpent and Other Stories (1952). This short story collection established her as one of the leading white critics of aparthied in South Africa. While the plot of the story concerns a train stopping in, and then leaving, a poverty-stricken African town, the text is loaded with heavy symbolism that evole the complex politics of southern Africa region, especially after the imposition of apartheid, which forcibly segregated white and black populations in South Africa, leaving the majority black population disenfranchised and impoverished.

The story’s themes include shame, unequal relations between different races, and the dynamics of exploitation.

The story is written in present tense, which mimics the speed of the on-rushing train of the story’s title. Though told in the third person, the perspective changes throughout, shifting among the viewpoints of various black and white people. It is set in a land north of South Africa, Rhodesia, which was a British self-governing colony from 1923 to 1965. Presently, the territory is roughly the equivalent of Zimbabwe. It is landlocked, and throughout the 20th century, was marked by intense civil and international wars. Zimbabwe’s longest-serving president, Robert Mugabe, is generally recognized as a dictator with a long history of human rights violations. He held absolute power from 1987-2017.

The short story opens as a train moves towards a small village along a single train track. The stationmaster prepares to greet the visitors. His children run around barefoot. Chickens and dogs also run through the unordered landscape. Gordimer describes how shadows “lapped all around, from sky to sky, cast[ing] little rhythmical cups of shadow, so that the sand became the sea, and closed over the children’s black feet softly and without imprint.” The wife of the stationmaster sits in the shade, with a recently captured animal carcass swaying behind her.

Once the train docks in the station, it temporarily becomes a part of the town. Merchants share their artwork with the train’s passengers; the children ask the travellers for money; the dogs linger around the train kitchen which smells like onions and meat.

A young white woman is on the train travelling through Africa with her husband, who is also young and white. The young woman talks to an old “native” man about purchasing a miniature model of a lion. She especially likes how a hint of fur is wrapped around its immobile neck. Eventually she says it’s too much money. When the old man consents to a lower price, the young woman thinks that, as a tourist, she has already bought enough trinkets, including wooden hippos and elephants. She worries they might look ridiculous at home and would lose the novelty they had in Africa. The couple end up buying nothing from the old man.

A bell sounds, alerting everyone to the train’s imminent departure. Some men who had been stretching their legs on the station platform, jump back on board. For many of the passengers on board, leaving the small, rural train station doesn’t mean anything. Many are tipsy with beer and don’t pay attention to what’s going on outside of their window.

The train starts moving. At the last second, the young white husband indignantly throws money from the train to the old man. The old man throws the toy lion up to them through the window. All of the villagers watch the train go. The narrator makes the notable decision to describe the children as “piccanins,” which is an offensive term for black children in South Africa, but one that accurately represented the feelings of some of the white passengers.

Back on the train, the young white man gives his wife the toy lion he just purchased. He says that he was just bargaining with the old man for fun, and at the last minute the old man ran after the train agreeing to his terms and conditions (even though it was he, the young man, who made the final offer). His wife doesn’t take kindly to this: she thinks he should have dealt with the old man honestly and purchased the lion for a fair price.

The husband counters that she was the one who said it was too expensive, anyway. The young wife throws the lion into the seat. She is angry with her husband, but mostly with herself, for her role in this exploitation. She considers what a nice piece of art the lion is: the carving is exact, the tail looks real, the teeth are ferocious, and the tongue is black and sinuous like the sea. In any other place, the work of such a talented artist would fetch a far higher price. She sits down, and is increasingly filled with shame.

The short story ends with the trains arrrival and departure as told from the villagers’ perspective. The narrator says the train had come into the station, taken what it wanted, then cast it off like an old skin. The train symbolizes the modern, western world’s economic power over Rhodesia’s inhabitants, as well as its habitual disregard for the dignity of black people.