“The Train from Rhodesia” is one of [Nadine Gordimer](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/south-african-literature-biographies/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](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/africa/south-african-political-geography/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](https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/literature-general/short-story) anthologies.

Author Biography

Nadine Gordimer was born in Springs, [South Africa](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/africa/south-african-political-geography/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*.

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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](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/united-states-and-canada/miscellaneous-us-geography/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](https://www.encyclopedia.com/science-and-technology/physics/science-general/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.

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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.

Characters

Old man

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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

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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

In “The Train from Rhodesia,” a train’s short stop in a poor African village highlights the racial and class barriers that typify South African life in the 1950s. Though only a few pages long, Gordimer’s story encompasses several themes besides racial inequality, including greed, poverty, and conscience.

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

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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

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“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-

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?

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](https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/art-and-architecture/prehistoric-and-primitive-art/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

Legal Separation of the Races

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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](https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/asia-and-africa/middle-eastern-history/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](https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/law/international-law/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

Compare & 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](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/united-states-and-canada/miscellaneous-us-geography/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](https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/asia-and-africa/southern-african-history/african-national-congress).  
    
  **1996:** South African President Nelson Mandela and the [African National Congress](https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/asia-and-africa/southern-african-history/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](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/james-baldwin) publishes *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* and [Ralph Ellison](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/ralph-ellison) publishes *The Invisible Man,* both seminal works on the theme of racial prejudice.  
    
  **1997:** The popularity of [Oprah Winfrey](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/film-and-television-biographies/oprah-winfrey)’s book club results in the skyrocketing sales of [Toni Morrison](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/toni-morrison)’s books.

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](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/history/historians-miscellaneous-biographies/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](https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/military-affairs-nonnaval/guerrilla) 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 Gordimer 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](https://www.encyclopedia.com/science-and-technology/physics/science-general/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* was 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