

The moment before the gun went off: class discussion essay sample

[Parts of the World](#), [Africa](#)



1. How would you interpret the meaning of this story?

a. In the story, Gordimer connects the two races as victims of the injustices of apartheid. The protagonist, Marais Van der Vyver's shows interest in the "black boy," Lucas a victim of freak accident, negligence, and ultimately apartheid. In the story Gordimer's shows how apartheid has become more than legislation; it has become a mentality that segregates and prejudices. More than just more than just the rear window of that truck separated Lucas and Van der Vyver. And in the end, just as Van de Vyver failed to acknowledge his son, the white community has refused to acknowledge the culture of discrimination and oppression.

2. What is the setting of the story? How does it help the reader better

understand the actions that play out in the story? a. The Moment Before The Gun Went Off is set in South Africa around the early 20th century. The date and location of this short story is very crucial to the story as a whole. The time period in which this short story is set in is important because it helps the reader understand the views each characters in the story have toward each other, and cultural norms which the characters take part in. With the knowledge of the story being in the early 20th century, the readers are able to come to understand that back then many farmers had black slaves help them on the farm. In the short story, a white farmer by the name of Marias Van der Vyver accidentally shot one of his hunting friends/farm workers, who happened to be black. This cultural aspect of their life is key to understanding why the world made a big fuss about the accident.

3. What is the significance in the title? What is important about the moment before the gun went off rather than after? a. In the moments before the gun was fired, there was a connection between Van der Vyer and Lucas. It showed that they were both people, not a black and a white. Life was simple; It was just a father and son going to look for game together. After the shot, life turned into a tempest of lies, politics and accusations. The moment before is the way that life should be lived, not the way it was after.

4. In the introduction for Gordimer, it says that she writes to have her stories always be contemporary and symbolic of social and historic patterns. Do you think that this is true of this story and why? a. I do. There was a point made on page 2792 that went “ But how can those others know that? They don’t want to know it.” I find this to be an exceptional jab at the western world’s view of Africa, even to this day. How often do we actually pay attention or think about problems there? It’s only when we are directly confronted with their issues. IE. War or commercials about starving children. There’s also the fact that news can easily be manipulated on its way to the rest of the world. We don’t know what’s true or false.

5. Newspapers and politics, especially international, are often mentioned within the story. What do you think Gordimer’s reason for putting them into the story is? a. She does this to show how information fails to get around correctly. Stories, like this one, will be interpreted however people can twist them to fit their own agendas. On page 2790, Gordimer writes that it will just become a statistic for anti-apartheid. An interesting thing to note is the line that reads “ The papers at home will quote the story as it appears in the

overseas press.” This shows information manipulation that will affect those who could be close by and think they know the truth. Overseas press seems to have priority for truth.

6. How did the press play a role in “ a moment before the gun went off”?

What was the real VdV and Lucas relationship on the property? a. South Africa at this time of era was waiting for something to give on the apartheid. This gunshot and death of a young Lucas sent the state into havoc. The press helped spread the story internally and worldwide, causing an uprising and revolution. The pressure and illustration of VdV made him seem like an apologetic politician trying to cover his tracks; almost sounding sarcastic. Little did the outside community know that they were truly complimentary of each other in the aspect of farm lifestyle. Lucas learned how to manage machinery and how to maintain a farm. And VdV appreciated the help from a young able man that was eager to learn. After these factors fell into play, the two men naturally respected one another for whom they were and what they did for one another.

7. What are some themes used to help add meaning to the story? a. The narrator points out several stereotypes of black people living in South Africa during that time (along with alienation and communication). For example, he talks about how they raise their children differently from whites and spending their last earnings on funerals etc. By telling the story through this point of view, Gordimer is pointing out the naivety of the white people towards discrimination and separation between blacks and whites that takes

place in apartheid. This view lays out a scene in which faults of a divided and victimizing apartheid are revealed.

8. Name some sentences/quotes within the text that could be considered important to meaning/moral of the story. a. “ It just goes to show what shock can do; when you look at the newspaper photographs you feel like apologizing, as if you had stared in on some room where you should not be.” This quote is important because it illustrates the fact that a lot of things are spread throughout the world in newspapers and photographs, whether they are one hundred percent accurate or not. It is also important because it shows the readers how the story changes through the newspaper. In the newspaper, no one was told the real story. b. “ The young black callously shot through the negligence of the white man was not the farmer’s boy; he was his son”. The last line of the entire short story is very significant. This is because it explains to the reader the impact of the death for the farmer; the death of his secretive son. Additionally, the last line clears up the entire story about why the farmer was not able to tell the complete story of his taboo relationship with his dead son.

9. Race relations is an important part of the story. Point out some examples of the differences between Blacks and Whites and how it makes an impact on the story. a. On page 2792, the comment on the elaborate funeral and how it means so much to Blacks, how they saved up their meager earnings for a decent coffin. The rich white farmer could pay for someone else’s funeral, while the majority of blacks could barely afford their own. Also on this page, the air of contempt with the “(of course)” shows the negative

perception of blacks from a white point of view. Also on that page is the fact that blacks expose their children to pain and fear while whites do not. This could be interpreted as blacks being aware that they couldn't hide their children from pain, while white children could avoid it. On Page 2793, in parentheses there is " they start bearing children at puberty" is another example of contempt towards black people. It's another generalized statement that separates them from the whites.

10. Gordimer is known for meticulous detail and fully realized characters in her stories. Give some details about the main character, Marais Van der Vayer, and his past. a. (Page 2791) He was very shy and awkward as a child, not wanting anyone to see his emotions. He inherited his property from his father, including dozens of people of varying ages and genders. This suggests that he was a moderately wealthy man. He was considered big, calm and clever by Captain Beetge. Opposite of this, he was absolutely devastated by the accident. He considered raising game and cattle to be a sacred duty.

11. What do you think about the relationship between Van de Vyer and Captain Beetge? a. The two grew up together in the farmer's district and both were aware of the culture and lifestyle of growing up in the bush, hunting and shooting guns. Both realized this new tragedy and accident would notarize the world's perception of South Africa regarding the unequal right blacks had there, that soon would cause many problems for both of them. Captain Beetge was aware that VdV understood this by the emotions he radiated, weeping like a dirty kid, snot running down his hand and face.

The brandy represented medicine that would temporarily collect his thoughts so he could face the gripes, moans, and criticisms of the community. VDV-As a kid who was good at hiding his smile but now in such a distressed state he could not hold his emotions inside or behind his soft mustache. Captain Beetge saw this and would give him some time to recuperate after he had finished his brandy when in the police station to give a statement.

12. How does the revelation at the end of the story change your perception of the story? Of how Van der Vyer reacted to the shooting? a. It makes it much more personal, especially for Van der Vyer. He wasn't crying over the fact that he killed some random farmhand that he happened to like. He killed his own flesh and blood. This can in turn show that it's possible for Whites and Blacks to interact as normally as people of the same race. This also explains the way that Van der Vyer and the mother act to each other at the funeral. There is also the inherent allusion to the fact that older white men would have relations with younger female blacks. Lucas was in his twenties and his mother was in her mid to late 30s; mixed with the fact that, "they bear at puberty" was mentioned means that she slept with Van der Vyer around that time.

13. Now how does the surprise ending also contribute to the issue of apartheid and the state of the country during that time? a. The last sentence suggests that the farmer killed his farm hand who was also his son. Living in apartheid South Africa, having a child with someone of the opposite race would be unthinkable and therefore he shot his son to avoid the truth being uncovered. This is where the true irony of the story comes out since the

narrator contradicts everything he said before. As described by the narrator, it is clear that the people of South Africa are more concerned with how stories like these will make the country look in the eyes of outside countries, rather than focusing on the problem of racism at hand.