

# Racism: a comparison and contrast of two literary works

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Racism: A Comparison and Contrast of Two Literary Works The words, purpose and identity are familiar with mankind. These words can mean many things to many different individuals. Each person on this Earth is uniquely made with unique DNA patterns and fingerprints that cannot be matched with any other individual among the billions of people that occupy this planet we call Earth. Why is prejudice so common among people if everyone is unique and special? This question remains unanswered. Many authors have written essays, stories, and poems about negative judgmental and biased views of people in hopes to understand unfair treatment towards mankind and promote changes in human behavior that will bring solutions of peace. This paper will reflect on the stories, *Country Lovers*, by Nadine Gordimer and *The Welcome Table*, by Alice Walker. Gordimer and Walker have become activists for fair and unbiased treatment among mankind. Both authors have been rewarded numerous honorary awards for promoting peace. Ironically, Nadine Gordimer is a white woman born and raised in South Africa and Alice Walker is an African American but both authors have kindred spirits and are celebrated for their commitments to fight the cruel elements of racism. Nadine Gordimer's *Country Lovers* is a story about Thebedi, a black girl, and Paulus, a white boy, who fell in love. Gordimer wrote the story from a third-person point of view. The point of view is objective; the characters' thoughts are not exposed as in the omniscient point of view. The point of view allows the reader to concentrate on the characters' actions, creating a more dramatic effect. Thebedi and Paulus' attraction to each other was unforbidden and socially not acceptable in the South African culture in which they were raised. Both children were raised on a South African farm, one that

was owned by Paulus' parents. Thebedi was one of the many black hired hands, slaves, or servants who worked on the Eysendyck's family farm. The story does not clearly give a time period when the events unfolded, but the era of white dominance that existed over the black people was clearly defined, as the story states, " The farm children play together when they are small, but once the white children go away to school they soon don't play together any more...so that by the time early adolescence is reached, the black children are making along with the bodily changes common to all, an easy transition to adult forms of address, beginning to call their old playmates missus and baasie little master" (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 1). Paulus and Thebedi exchanged gifts and their attraction for each other grew. Thebedi proudly wore a pair of hoop earrings given to her by Paulus but could not tell of the giver's real identity and stated the earrings came from " the missus" (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 3). Likewise, Paulus wore a bracelet made of elephant hair that was given by Thebedi but told everyone that one of the workers from his father's farm had given him the gift (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 2). The fact that each person hid each other's identities about the gifts suggest that their friendship was not acceptable because of their differences in racial and social statuses. As Thebedi and Paulus grew older, they frequently met at a remote dried river bed, each one walking a measureable distance from each other so that they would not be seen together. Paulus often spoke about his adventures away from home, as he was home for the holidays from a boarding school. Thebedi would ask questions and listen intently, enjoying Paulus' company and laughing together (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1,

paragraph 4). The friendship grew stronger and became sexual (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraphs 5 and 8). The couple continued to sneak around and see each other secretly, sometimes at Paulus' home while his parents were away, as expressed in the line, "The door of the parents' bedroom was locked and the empty rooms where the girls had slept had sheets of plastic spread over the beds. It was in one of these that she and the farmer's son stayed together whole nights almost: she had to get away before the house servants, who knew her, came in at dawn. " (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 8). The mood of the story quickly begins to change when Thebedi, at age 18, enters an arranged marriage union with Njabulo, a fellow black worker on the Eysendyck farm (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 9). Thebedi's father was also a worker on the Eysendyck farm and saw Njabulo worthy of marrying his daughter; Njabulo was of the same social status as Thebedi's family. Thebedi did not tell Paulus about her engagement to Njabulo, nor did she speak of her pregnancy, which was in the seventh month at the time she married Njabulo (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 9). Soon, Thebedi gives birth to a healthy daughter, and with no surprise to the reader, the baby was light skinned (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 9). Njabulo's disposition is one of high regards, as the story describes him as making no complaint, but " Out of his farm labourer's earnings he bought...a pink plastic bath, six napkins, a card of safety pins, a knitted jacket, cap and bootees, a dress, and a tin of Johnson's Baby Powder, for Thebedi's baby" (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 9). The author points out that the baby belongs to Thebedi, not Njabulo, but Njabulo assumes the role as father and provides for the child whole

heartedly. The story's plot comes to the climax when Paulus comes home from veterinary school and discovers not only is Thebedi married, but she has a child. Paulus visits the infant and immediately realizes he is the father of Thebedi's baby. His reaction was a disturbed and embarrassed one, as the story explains, " He said nothing. He struggled for a moment with a grimace of tears, anger, and self-pity" as he asked Thebedi, " You haven't been near the house with it? " (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraphs 11 and 12). The reader sees the heart of Paulus at this point. It. The baby is referred to an it. Not a person but a thing that would bring him and his family shame and disgrace if anyone should find out. Paulus's heart is further exposed with his commands to Thebedi, " Don't take it out. Stay inside. Can't you take it away somewhere. You must give it to someone---". Paulus left Thebedi's home with the words, " I feel like killing myself" coming from the depths of his heart and out of his mouth (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 19). Paulus returns to Thebedi's home shortly after and the reader discovers that Thebedi's baby has been poisoned to death. The autopsy revealed intestinal damage not consistent with natural reason of death (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 22). Thebedi appears at an initial examination for the murder charges against Paulus, wearing the hoop earrings that Paulus had given her during their summer romance (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 24). Thebedi stated she had seen Paulus pouring something into her daughter's mouth at the initial examination but later changed her story at Paulus' trial, stating she did not see anything that took place in her home. Thebedi wore her hoop earrings at both events, suggesting to the reader that she would always cherish Paulus and the affair they had together (Clugston 2010,

section 3. 1, paragraph 25). Thebedi brought along her newborn baby at the time of the trial, suggesting to the reader that Thebedi had to go on with her life and concentrate on her new husband and her new baby; while Thebedi still cherished the memories that she and Paulus made together, those memories were only in the past. The reality was that Thebedi and Paulus had no chance of a future together. Paulus was found not guilty of the murder charge and Thebedi was interviewed by the Sunday papers. The author carefully points out that the newspapers “ spelled her name in a variety of ways” suggesting that Thebedi was a common person and viewed in society as an individual with little importance (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 30). The story ends with Thebedi’s comment, “ It was a thing of our childhood. We don’t see each other anymore” (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 30). The author of *Country Lovers*, Nadine Gordimer, spoke out against racism in her interview presented by the Nobel Peace Organization on October 3, 2007. Having been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1991, an unnamed spokesperson asked Gordimer about the turning point in her life in which she became an activist for racism. Gordimer explained, “ It was unthinkable for me to know black people whom would share my interests. It was always a servant/master basis. Even if you were the child of the master or mistress, you still had this particular position. But being troubled about it...I was beginning to find out there was something called racism in this world, and I was living in it. I was part of it. And then when I was older, training at Witwatersrand University, and there for the first time I met. there was one or two...there were a few young black members of the University, of course was whites only...there were certain courses that were

not available in the black universities. And then as concession of post graduate level a few blacks would come in. I met one or two black people with whom I had far more in common than I had with the young whites that I knew at the time. There were young people who were trying to write, who were beginning to write. We had this enormous approach to life. I began at that age to make black friends. I moved into and entered into a fitting of incredible distortions of racism. Not only the impression of blacks but the distortions in my personality and my mind as a white. These became very part of my life and indeed started my way to freedom from racism"

(Nobelpeace. org, 2007). Gordimer, a native from Springs, South Africa, undoubtedly wrote *Country Lovers* based on experiences she dealt with firsthand growing up. In addition to winning the Nobel Prize in Literature, she has been awarded with several honorary degrees, ranging from Yale, Harvard, Columbia, and holds degrees from University of York in England and Witwatersrand in South Africa among many other schools (Nobelpeace. org, 2005). Some of the many honors extended to Gordimer have included being an Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, Honorary Member of the American Academy & Institute of Arts & Letters, and she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Honour of the Republic of Chile (Nobelpeace. org, 2007). Alice Walker's *The Welcome Table* also presents a theme of racism. Walker is best known for her novel, *The Color Purple*, which led to Walker's award of the Pulitzer Prize for the literary work (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1,). *The Welcome Table* is told from a third-person omniscient point of view, carefully giving details of the thoughts of the main character, an elderly, rejected black woman, and those of the snobbish,

prejudiced white people. The third-person omniscient point of view allows the reader to understand the deepest thoughts of the characters. The story begins introducing the old woman as one who has known suffering and who is looking for peace, dressed in her best Sunday clothes intending to worship at a local church (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 1). The unusual thing about the black woman's presence is that the church is in an all- white community. The white people do not want the woman at their church and the narrator is quick to disclose the peoples' thoughts, And so they gazed nakedly upon their own fear transferred; a fear of the black and the old, a terror of the unknown as well as of the deeply known" (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 1). The narrator adds that " some of them there saw the age, the dotage, the missing buttons down the front of her mildewed black dress...Those who knew the hesitant creeping up on them of the law, saw the beginning of the end of the sanctuary of Christian worship, saw the desecration of Holy Church, and saw an invasion of privacy, which they struggled to believe they still kept" (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 2). The white people's prejudice against the black woman suggest that this time period was when Civil Rights laws were being made and the white people did not want to accept the new laws that gave the right to black people to be in public places (Cheever J. and Mason B., 2012). Cheever and Mason add that " Privacy did not really mean privacy. They wanted to maintain their unequal social system and their own privileges at all costs" (Cheever J. and Mason B., 2012). The narrator tells the reader that the woman had walked a half of a mile to get to the church (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 3). The determination of the elderly woman contrasts



with the character Thebedi from the previous story in that the unnamed woman does not give in to the white people's dominating views, as she presses on to the white church. However, Thebedi knew her place within the society that was dominated by the white people. Thebedi accepted that she would not ever be able to fit into the white people's world and have a future together with Paulus; subsequently, she proceeded to marry Njabulo, even though she was carrying Paulus' child. The next paragraph of *The Welcome Table* states that even the reverend of the church disapproved of the black woman's presence (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 4). The people "stared at her as they came in and sat down near the front...the site of her, sitting there somehow passionately ignoring them, brought them up short, burning Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 4). An usher came up to the woman and told her to leave. (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 5). *The Welcome Table* and *Country Lovers* both introduce the reader to white people's prejudiced and biased views toward black people. The black woman was looked down as an outcast in *The Welcome Table*, much like Paulus' response when he saw his daughter, a product of a lowly, black servant girl. Paulus' remark that he wanted to kill himself tells the reader that he thought his situation was so embarrassing and disgraceful that he would rather end his life than be exposed that he was a father to a half black daughter. Paulus wanted to send Thebedi away or have Thebedi give the baby to someone far away- so that no one would know about Thebedi and Paulus' affair. The white people in *The Welcome Table* did not kill anyone as Paulus did but they had hatred in their hearts and they might as well have killed the black woman. They literally picked her up and tossed her back outside into the cold air. The

narrator describes the incident as “ It was the ladies who finally did what to them had to be done. Daring their burly indecisive husbands to throw the old colored woman out they made their point...Could their husbands expect them to sit up in church with that? No, no, the husbands were quick to answer and even quicker to do their duty (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 5). The next paragraph describes the removal of the woman, “ Under the old woman’s arms they placed their hard fists...Under the old woman’s arms they raised their fists, flexed their muscular shoulders, and out she flew through the door, back under the cold blue sky (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 6). The narrator explains that the woman had been singing in her head when she was rudely interrupted and thrown out of the church (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 7). This woman was singing. She had joy in her heart. She was daring and brave to come to the white people’s church but it should not have been a risk. It’s God’s people who are supposed to be lovable and accepting towards people-all people of every race, color, and tribe. The use of the third-person omniscient point of view engages the reader to feel the discomfort and the agitation towards the biased white people who threw someone out of the church simply because of the color of a person’s skin. It is one of the most disgraceful and wrong sins church people could commit. The narrator states that the woman looked down the highway and saw Jesus himself approaching her (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 8). The white people met together for church meeting in their best Sunday clothes, most likely carrying their bibles and sang of God’s love, yet God was not in their church. God was with the black woman and showed compassion by sending His Son Jesus to meet the

woman and comfort her in her time of need. As Jesus approached the woman, he simply stated, " Follow Me" (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 10). The author must have known about the bible because Jesus told his disciples many times throughout the bible to follow him. Jesus also stated, " I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (John 10: 14) and " My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10: 27). The words, Follow Me were very appropriate for this story. The woman gladly followed Jesus. The narrator states, " Jesus gave her one of his beautiful smiles and they walked on. She did not know where they were going; someplace wonderful, she suspected. The ground was like clouds under their feet, and she felt she could walk forever without becoming the least bit tired (Clugston 2010, section 3. 1, paragraph 11). Not only is the woman walking side by side by Jesus, she is strengthened and her energy is renewed. The character, Njabulo in Country Lovers can be compared to the loving father like figure Jesus was to the old woman in The Welcome Table. Both Njabulo and Jesus met the needs of those around them. Njabulo was a great provider and bought several of the babies' needs from his small income earned on the farm and was a great support to Thebedi throughout the story. Jesus accepted the elderly black woman and was everything she needed, taking care of all her needs. Alice Walker, the author of The Welcome Table, has dedicated her entire life in helping people. She has been very active in the Civil Rights Movement, promoting equal rights for black people (Jokinen 2006, p. 1). She has also been an activist for the women's movement, anti-apartheid movement, anti-nuclear movement, and has opposed female genital mutilation (Jokinen 2006, p. 1). Walker has received

many awards, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for her novel, *The Color Purple*, the Lillian Smith Award, The Rosenthal Award, the Front Page Award for Best Magazine Criticism, and the Townsend Prize and Lyndhurst Prize (Jokinen 2006, p. 1). In the story, *Country Lovers*, the character Paulus was also educated and could have been influential in his community as an activist for black people but Paulus was more concerned about his social status. The thought of having a biracial child was degrading and unthinkable to Paulus. There has been recent attention to biracial identities in America. Kelly Rockquemore and David Brunsma teamed up together to write *Beyond Black; Biracial Identity in America* (Harris 2003, p. 436). The two authors presented a new approach to studying biracial profiles, arguing that previous projects by others assumed that all biracial individuals thought of themselves as merely biracial but, in reality, biracials claim they think of themselves as always white, always black, sometimes white, sometimes black, or even raceless (Harris 2003, p. 436). One could suspect that biracial studies as the ones conducted by Rockquemore and Brunsma would promote black and white people to live together in peace, merging communities, families, and hopefully, churches. South Africa, the setting of the story, *Country Lovers*, has actually had to address the issues of racism and has made changes to its government to promote equal rights among the people. In 1994, South Africa adopted a democratic form of government (Lefko-Everetti, 2012, p. 69). The Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, made into law in 1996, states " full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms' and prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity and gender" (Lefko-Everetti, 2012, p. 69). It has been said that non-

racialism was one of the key founding values in making the new Constitution (Lefko-Everetti, 2012, p. 79). Lefko-Everetti adds that, " the goal of pursuing a non-racial society accepting of diversity is embodied in the Constitution and continues to be embraced by many South Africans" (Lefko-Everetti, p. 79). Authors Alice Walker and Nadine Gordimer have dedicated themselves for fighting for active rights of the people. Both authors have been awarded with numerous awards and have been recognized publicly for their written works against racism. Many other authors have written about racism and have joined their efforts with Walker and Gordimer to promote peace among mankind and to recognize that every individual deserves to be respected and not to be judged upon the color of their skin, nor of their religion preference, or their ethnicity. The stories, *The Welcome Table* and *Country Lovers* are prime examples of literary works that point out the sad and ugly realities of racism's presence in communities.

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