

# Good race and ethnicity in literature research paper example

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



## **Introduction**

Literature tackles significant themes that relate to social issues and situations. Some of them are relevant in helping us understand human nature or explore life during specific periods in history. Nadine Gordimer's "Country Lovers" and Patricia Smith's "What it's like to be a Black Girl" illustrate both concepts, such that they are different types of literature but an analysis of these two focuses on human nature in relation to the influence of a specific period of history, specifically during the decades that racism was prevalent in different parts of the world. Moreover, both literary works show the impact of racism on ethnic identity after prolonged injustice and discrimination. Gordimer's "Country Lovers" shows readers a glimpse of life for black people, especially women, in a racist society after the post-colonial period, while Smith's "What it's like to be a Black Girl" shows the impact of racism on ethnic identity that carries over event to the younger generations. The following discussion focuses on the exploration of these themes and the analysis of both works based on content, form, and style.

## **Theme and Content**

In terms of content, race, specifically racism and discrimination, is a central theme in both "Country Lovers" and "What it's like to be a Black Girl", albeit within different contexts. Gordimer's "Country Lovers" explores racism against black women during the post-colonial period. On the contrary, Smith's "What it's like to be a Black Girl" explores the impact of prolonged racism on ethnic identity from the perspective of a 9 year old girl. The content of both literary works will be detailed and discussed subsequently in

relation to the identified theme.

“Country Lovers” paints a picture of life for black people during the post-colonial period. Although white and black children play together in farms, disparities between these groups still persist due to rampant racism. While white children go to school, black children remain in the farmland. Some black children attend schools but they later on drop out because their grades fall far below the average grades of white students. Black students were behind academically then but poor performance in school was not a result of race but the limitations impinged upon the black community because of their race. Racism throughout the United States, especially in the South during the post-colonial period or after the period of Reformation, created a gap between white and black communities in various degrees. Due to slavery during the colonial period, black people assumed the minority status in American society when they were denigrated to roles of farmers, house helps or servants (Horton & Horton, 2006). On the contrary white people assumed their roles in the middle and upper classes of society. Since then, the gap between these groups widened and this gap has affected the socio-economic status of white people. Black communities remained poor neighborhoods and had low-paying jobs. As a result, black families could not send their children to school while white families were able until their children finished college, and later on, held positions in high-paying jobs. Poor socio-economic conditions and limited opportunities for black people, therefore, similarly limited their capabilities to send their children to school. This explains why black children remained in the farm while white children went to school, and why the former failed to compete academically with the

latter.

As children, Thebedi found a friend in Paulus who belonged to a white family. They grew up playing with one another, unencumbered by the realities in their community that frowned upon relations between white and black people. When they grow into adolescence, Thebedi and Paulus developed romantic relations with one another. Paulus left the farm before to attend school and only came back during the summer holidays. Paulus and Thebedi met by the river where they used to play as children and talked as old friends. Since then, Paulus and Thebedi met by the river each time Paulus came home for the summer holidays. During one of these summer holidays, Paulus and Thebedi start sleeping together but always in secret. Paulus always told her where to meet him and shortly, Thebedi learned how to move around him. Thebedi, for instance, knew to visit Paulus at his house when his parents left the farmhouse. Paulus and Thebedi's secretive relationship also illustrates undercurrents of racism. Paulus adored Thebedi but because of stigma attached to race, he wanted to keep it secret because he knew that people would frown upon their relationship and taunt him for going after a black woman.

After several years of joyful summer holidays together without being discovered, Paulus came home and learned that Thebedi has just given birth. Paulus sought Thebedi out and saw that she now lives with another man, Njabulo. He demanded that Thebedi show him her child. When Paulus saw the child, he knew that it was his. Many people in the village talked about Thebedi's baby because unlike other children of black people in their community, the baby's skin never got darker. Njabulo knew that the child

was not his own but he loved Thebedi so he accepted her and her child, and even built a house for their family. Two days after visiting Thebedi, Paulus returned. He went inside the house and left shortly. In the morning, Thebedi and Njabulo sees that the child was dead. The court summoned Thebedi and she told the arbiter that she had no choice but to let Paulus poison her baby because he held a gun after. Thebedi later on retracts her statement. In the end, the court decided that Paulus was not guilty. When asked for a statement after the court's decision, Thebedi told the people that thing between her and Paulus was a thing of the past and that it was over now. The short story is a good medium that not only follows Thebedi's story but also provides a glimpse of the history of racism. As previously noted, racism in America persisted even after the Colonial Period until the Civil War. Its history can be traced to slavery. During the colonial period, slavery was rampant due to the prevalence of colonialism and white supremacy. Colonies participated in the slave trade and most slaves hailed from Africa. When they were bought as slaves they worked as servants for white families and were treated badly by their masters. In the South, wealthy plantation owners bought slaves to work in farmlands. Most of the African American slaves experienced inhumane treatment. After this period, racism persisted as a result of the stigma attached to skin color, a resulting effect of slavery. Segregation was a discernible outcome of racism. White people enjoyed prominent positions and influence in society while they shunned black people and treated the latter as second class citizens. These ideas materialize in Gordimer's novel.

The foregoing events in the short story also illustrates racism, and even a

lack of regard for the wellbeing of women. As previously noted, Paulus loved Thebedi but instead of coming out to show people that he was with her, he never did. Paulus wanted to keep their relationship a secret because he was ashamed of her because of the color of Thebedi's skin. Paulus' shame was also the factor that pushed him to kill his own child. He knew that people would be able to figure out that he is the father of Thebedi's baby. He found the shame unbearable that he even thought of killing himself but in the end, he killed the baby instead. This pertains to racism because if Paulus would have had a child with a white woman from a wealthy and known family, he would not have thought of killing his child.

Smith's "What it's like to be Black Girl" illustrates the effect of prolonged racism on ethnic identity even among black people from younger generations (Kim, 2012). The treatment of black people, especially of black women, since the colonial period has left a mark on black people's psyche, so much so that some of them have forgotten to embrace their ethnicity and culture (Smith & Silva, 2011). Paulus' shame in "Country Lovers" illustrates what black people have been through in the past – people were ashamed of them and this shame has lowered their sense of worth and affinity with their race and culture. This shows in the way the 9 year old speaker spoke in "What it's like to be a Black Girl". Even at a young age, the speaker feels the pressure of being socially accepted (Watson, Ancis, White, & Nazari, 2013). To conform and to feel accepted in society, the young girl feels that she needs to look a certain way. She feels like there is something wrong that she needs to correct. As a result, she tries to change things about her, like her hair, and the color of her eyes. The girls' sentiments in the poem reflects the

## Form

In terms of form, “Country Lovers” and “What it's like to be a Black Girl” follow different structures. The former is a short story while the latter is in poetry form. The form has something to do with the content and Gordimer and Smith chose appropriate forms that matched the content of their works. The short story form is appropriate for Gordimer’s “Country Lovers” because it follows Thebeldi's story. Moreover, Thebeldi and Paulus’ story spans from childhood to adolescence, and then adulthood. In a way, this structure and form reflects the prolonged history of racism, such that black people grow up experiencing racism at every turn. During the post-colonial period, most people in the black community were born into a racist society and grew up and died in one. In the same way, Thebeldi witnessed racism since childhood. She was one of the children that did not go to school while the white children attended school until college. Although Thebeldi and Paulus were together for many summers, Paulus kept their relationship secret. When she gave birth to Paulus’ child, she killed the baby and left her without saying a word. Moreover, if other people learned about their relationship, people would shame her. She went through with these experiences since childhood until she grew into a woman.

In terms of style, Gordimer and Smith both employ different ones but perhaps the one that stands out the most and makes both literary works comparable is the voice or point of view. Smith’s “What it’s like to be a Black Girl” is told from the young girl’s point of view. This style works best in the poem because it is about the feelings, emotions, and thoughts of a young girl. By writing in the first person point of view, readers would be able

to get into the young girl's head space and understand that those reflect her thoughts and emotions, as well as the thoughts and emotions of every young black girl. This aspect of the poem makes it a relatable piece of literature. In "Country Lovers", Gordimer wrote the short story in third person. The style that Gordimer employed was appropriate because it shows the readers a glimpse of the thoughts and experiences of Thebedi and Paulus, therefore, allowing them to get to know and judge the characters enough to understand their motivations and intentions. Moreover, Gordimer's writing was prose-like and she weaved the story in a way that would allow readers to follow Thebedi and Paulus' relationship since they were children. Thebedi and Paulus' history not only illustrated their relationship but also some parts of the history of the plight of black communities.

What is interesting about Gordimer's style is that she left out details in the story. Readers will follow Thebedi and Paulus' story but Gordimer left out some parts and jumped to future scenes or events in the story. Gordimer's style made "Country Lovers" more interesting because the reader becomes an engaged audience. By leaving out some parts in the story, the reader then uses his or her imagination and fills in parts of the story with ideas based on what he or she knows about life during the post-colonial period and the experiences of black people as a result of racism and discrimination. Moreover, readers can make predictions based on the motivations and intentions of the characters in the story.



## Conclusion

Gordimer's "Country Lovers" and Smith's "What it's like to be a Black Girl" both tackle relevant themes in racism. "Country Lovers" provides a glimpse of life during the post-colonial period for black people, especially black women, while "What it's like to be a Black Girl" shows the impact of prolonged racism and discrimination to black communities including those in the younger generations. The concept of shame links both stories, such that Paulus' shame in "Country Lovers" illustrates the shame that took form out of long decades of racism, influencing black communities to also feel shame about their culture and ethnic identity. Consequently, this shame was passed on to younger generations and influenced the ethnic identity of younger black communities. Overall, both stories, when analyzed in relation to one another, ultimately shows the detrimental impact of racism that spans for decades and muddles ethnic identity. In terms of form and style, Gordimer and Smith both employed forms and styles that matched the message, content, and theme of their works. Moreover, these forms and styles helped bring about what each story sought to convey to the audience about race and ethnic identity.

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