

The moment before
the gun went off
essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Marais Van der Vyver, the main character in the Nadine Gordimer's short story, "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off," is characterized as an aloof, rich white man. The accidental death of Lucas, the black farm boy brings about a clearer perspective on Van der Vyver's character.

Van der Vyver's character is central to the whole theme of the story.

Gordimer's characterization of him shows that behind racial tensions, relationships can be formed between people of different races and social classes. Gordimer does not outright describe Van der Vyver. Instead she uses the character's thought, actions, and the very few words that he utters to make readers see who he really is. Furthermore, through her characterization, readers get to see the underlying relationships that he had formed with black people which, during that time, seemed impossible and unbelievable. For instance, when asked in an interview after Lucas' death, Van der Vyver said, "He was my friend, I always took him hunting with me."

This line shows that to a certain extent, Van der Vyver had already established a relationship with Lucas which people did not know of nor would they have believed it. More importantly, Van der Vyver's actions after Lucas' death further shows the grief he felt over the death. Gordimer wrote, "He was shaking, this big, calm, clever son of Willem Van der Vyver, who inherited the old man's best farm. The black was stone dead, nothing to be done for him... after the brandy Van der Vyver wept. He sobbed, snot running onto his hands, like a dirty kid."

The grief that Van der Vyver felt was further highlighted by how the author described him during the funeral, "He does not let her clothing, or that of

anyone else gathered closely, make contact with him. He, too, stares at the grave. The dead man's mother and he stare at the grave in communication like that between the black man outside and the white man inside the cab the moment before the gun went off." These actions clearly show that Van der Vyer was more than guilty. He was grieving the death not because of the consequences that he might have to face but because he felt that he had lost someone dear to him.

Gordimer characterized Van der Vyer in the way she did to show that often times, there is more to a story than what the general public thinks of it. In this case, it was to show that relationships can exist without anyone knowing about it. Lucas was Van der Vyer's son. He lost not just a farm boy but a son he valued dearly. People just did not know.