

# [Comparing and contrasting nadine gordimer’s narrative situations essay sample](https://assignbuster.com/comparing-and-contrasting-nadine-gordimers-narrative-situations-essay-sample/)

“ Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them” (Vygotsky, 1896-1934). Words so completely surround humans that we rarely are fully aware of the extent to which they are used. Language is used to describe, express, and speculate. It is also, however, used to persuade and manipulate. Authors know this, and because they cannot play with their audience’s mind using speech, they use writing, and, more specifically, narrative situation. A good example of this is short story writer Nadine Gordimer who includes bizarrely alternating combinations of narration, perspective, and narrative level in nearly every one of her stories. Out of these, there are two that have been shaped by narrative situation in such an intellectually frightening manner that they would be a meaningless mass of words without it: “ Some Are Born to Sweet Delight” and “ A Journey”.

“ Some Are Born to Sweet Delight” is a haunting tale about an innocent small-town girl who falls into a relationship with an ominously mysterious foreigner, and gets killed when he, without her knowledge, uses her to bomb the plane she boards. Less horrifying but just as captivating, “ A Journey” focuses on the different members of a family who have undergone character changes in order to adjust to their social surroundings. Narrative situation is vital to both these stories as it allows the reader to think about and eagerly await the painful epiphany of an ending while identifying with the characters to such an extent that they seem real. In “ Some Are Born to Sweet Delight”, Nadine Gordimer uses a 3rd person figural and consonant narrative situation to induce trepidation, while in “ A Journey”, she uses a combination of 1st person dissonant, and 3rd person figural and dissonant narrative situation to express the change that takes place in the characters over time, thus create a bildungsroman.

In “ Some Are Born to Sweet Delight”, Rad the terrorist’s sinister role is implied on every page by the narrator’s word choice. On the other hand, Vera, the innocent reflector, has been made relatable to; the perfect victim who blindly accepts everything without hesitation. Just like Vera, a typical girl, is easy for readers to relate to, and thus closer to the reader, Rad is alien because the lack of narration about him makes him impossible to identify with, as he seems so unfamiliar. In “ A Journey”, Gordimer uses narrative situation to define the occurrences in the family’s past from the points of view of the father and son. By doing so, the changes in character and maturity level of the two can be seen over time. In both short stories, the narrative situations and the effects they create allow readers to discover the underlying themes in an enthralling manner.

Just like any other work of fiction, “ Some Are Born to Sweet Delight” contains a protagonist and reflector, Vera, a 17-year-old girl who has the very human tendency, also known as a confirmation bias, to notice only evidence that supports her beliefs. By limiting the narration to Vera’s thoughts, actions, and beliefs, Gordimer makes sure that the reader’s sympathy resides with Vera, as he/she can see how and why Vera makes the decisions she does. From the first page, her unpredictability, childish stubbornness, and naivety are evident. After meeting and barely getting to know Rad, whom she finds awe-inspiring, she suddenly revolves her entire social life around him: “ she could not go to the pub; she could not let him [Rad] know that was where she was going.

The deceptions that did for parents were not for him. But the fact was there was no deception: she wasn’t going to the pub, she suddenly wasn’t going… she was in awe and ignorance of politics, nothing to do with her” (74). The first part of this passage elucidates that Vera is mercurial of decision, just like young children. This shows readers that she is gullible, manipulative, and thus, easy to take advantage of. The second part of the passage states that Vera reveres the foreign, and thus, being ignorant and curious, is very easy to lure into a trap, which is exactly what Rad does to her.

The narrator allows readers to form instant opinions about Vera by accurately displaying her emotions and thoughts. However, these opinions are not harsh and antagonistic; the reader almost becomes Vera while reading the story as she is a clear and associative character. Additionally, the narration characterizes her with a tendency to convince herself of things. Multiple times throughout the story, Vera mentally manipulates Rad’s reactions and attitude towards her as proof that he is just as enamored with her as she is with him. An outsider, such as the reader, can plainly see that Rad is definitely not in love; rather, Vera is living in a world of make-believe. The first instance when this is seen is when Vera meets Rad’s friends. The narrator explains:

Rad did have some friends, yes, young men like him, from his home. He and she encountered them on the street and instead of excusing himself and leaving her waiting obediently like one of those pet dogs tied up outside the supermarket, as he usually had done when he went over to speak to his friend, he took her with him and, as if remembering her presence after a minute or two of talk, interrupted himself: She’s Vera. Their greetings, the way they looked at her, after all, and she was happy. They made remarks in their own language she was sure referred to her (81).

In this quote, the figural narrator clarifies the fact that Vera chooses to see Rad the way she wants to see him, not how he really is. Assuming that the man Vera is infatuated with and sleeps with has mentioned her to his friends is far from something that should make Vera content. A relationship requires reciprocation of feelings and action, which is only being seen here for the first, but last, time. A second instance where Vera’s confirmation bias can be seen occurs a little later:

He did not take her in his arms, he did not touch her. -You will have the baby. We will marry.- It flew from her awkward, unbelieving, aghast with joy: -You want to marry me!- -Yes, you’re going to be my wife.- -Because of this?-a baby?- He was gazing at her intensely, wandering over the sight of her. – Because I’ve chosen you. – Of course, being a foreigner, he didn’t come out with things the way an English speaker would express them. And I love you, she said, I love you, I love you – babbling through vows and tears (82-3).

This scene only dilates that Rad does not love Vera; he has simply chosen her for the monstrous plan he wishes to execute in the future. He never expresses affection, but gullible Vera sees affection that is not there – apparently, he does not know how to articulate love in English. Before finding out that Rad is a terrorist, readers notice the forbiddingly happy-go-lucky tone and baleful diction surrounding the pair which definitely implies that something will go wrong. The feelings invoked in the reader by the narrative situation Gordimer uses are a mixture of pity and dread for what will happen to Vera. Therefore, it can be concluded that Vera could not have been characterized without narrative situation, as the essential feelings of sympathy and apprehension that Gordimer wanted to evoke in readers would not have surfaced otherwise.

Once again, Nadine Gordimer follows a fiction convention, this time one of developing an antagonist. Rad is a blurred man, who, interestingly and contrastingly, is sharply defined by the lack of narration. All readers know about Rad, at first, is Vera’s opinion of him, and even though she thinks she knows him, she does not. After finding out that he is a terrorist, readers can see exactly why he wishes to remain as inconspicuous as he is: “ there was no need for him to pretend or assume any role; he never showed any kind of presumption towards their daughter, spoke to her with the same reserve that he, a stranger, showed to them [the parents]. When he and the girl rose from the table to go out together, it was always as if he accompanied her, without interest, at her volition” (80).

This situation illuminates the hesitance Rad feels to express love toward Vera, because, as proved in the previous paragraph, he does not love her but only takes advantage of her credulousness. The lack of description from the narrator only implies his mystery and detachment from regular people. However, every now and then, the author lets loose a few details that add to Rad’s character. These descriptions, however, are not positive and appealing; they display the authority and determination which he uses not to love but solely to execute his diabolical plan: “ All that he had never done with her was begun and accomplished with unstoppable passion, summoned up as if at a mere command to himself; between this and the placing of his hand on hers in the kitchen, months before, there was nothing” (79).

A true courtship, unlike this one, contains a process of love built on mutual affection. Here, Rad feels no love towards Vera; he has ordered himself to make love to her because he needs to take advantage of the trust she will now place in him. The attraction he might feel towards Vera is strictly sexual. Thus, one can see that Rad, who does not love, is indeed menacing. The lack of narration about him on Gordimer’s part only shows that she did not want readers relating to him; she wanted him to stay alien, blurred, and separate from humanity. Gordimer’s usage of 3rd person figural narration to describe Vera, and the lack of narration about Rad convinces readers, justly, that the violent way out will always remain inhuman, and it is illogical to relate to that way of thinking.

“ Some Are Born to Sweet Delight” is a short story in which narrative situation plays a great role in contributing to the underlying theme. Nadine Gordimer illustrates the improvidence and expedience of the human race; it has failed to understand that the long-term consequences of its actions can be devastating. People convince themselves that the world has become more tolerant and liberal with time. However, societies have passed on some of the most horrible traditions from generation to generation, one of which is racism.

Since the 11th century, religious wars have torn families apart and segregated societies. Gordimer’s irony and pity for the people who live in such an unforgiving world can be seen when she states, “ there was a baby to be born, poor innocent” (84). She refers to the nastier aspects of society so frequently because she has been setting the stage for the painful conclusion: Rad bombing the plane Vera was on. The now fittingly authorial narrator states that he had done so on behalf of an oppressed people who were thirsty for revenge. As stated:

There was another disaster of the same nature, and a statement from a group with an apocalyptic name representing a faction of the world’s wronged, claiming the destruction of both planes in some complication of vengeance for holy wars, land annexation, invasions, imprisonments, cross-border raids, territorial disputes, bombings, sinkings, kidnappings no one outside the initiated could understand. A member of the group, a young man known as Rad among many other aliases, had placed in the hand-baggage of the daughter of the family with whom he lodged, and who was pregnant by him, an explosive device. Plastic. A bomb of the plastic type undetectable by the usual procedures of airport security (88).

It is easy to deduce from this passage that the “ world’s wronged” are the followers of Islam. Typically, a reader will erupt with shock at how easily Rad could mass murder like he did, however, it is essential to look at both sides of the tale first. Nadine Gordimer indirectly suggests that the violence that started with the crusades and the birth of Israel has come back around in the name of radical and revengeful groups such as Al-Qaeda. By using omniscient narration in the last paragraph, Nadine Gordimer shows readers that the story’s conclusion is unbiased, thus conveying a theme. She conveys that the human race is short-sighted and does not understand the magnitude of the devastation the consequences of their actions can bring about. In other words, Gordimer’s point in “ Some Are Born to Sweet Delight” is that racism and segregation harms society in the extreme.

The second story in which Nadine Gordimer uses narrative situation to inform readers about the nature of humankind is “ A Journey”. “ A Journey” shifts narrative situations most significantly from 1st person dissonant to 3rd person figural and dissonant; Gordimer uses these to indicate change in characters as they adjust to their surroundings.

The first character who changes is the elder son in the family. The 13-year old, currently on a plane with his mother and newborn brother, reflects on the past where he starts out as an innocent who enjoys the close-knit relationship of his family. However, he soon notices that his parents seem to be drifting further and further apart from each other. After reading the full story, the reader realizes that the family’s situation becomes such because the father has an affair. During the affair, he seems to feel that his family, especially his wife, is a burden to him. They lose their intimacy, and this causes a loss of warmth in the household, which is noticed by the son. As he reflects:

Round my twelfth birthday I noticed it, something went wrong in our house – I mean the house we are living in on this posting. My mother and father were almost silent at meals. The private language we used to speak together – cat language – we didn’t use it any more… my mother encouraged me to…sleep away from them, my mother and father. I cried once, by myself, because she seemed to want me out of the house… to talk without a kid around the way grown-ups sometimes do (146-7).

The father starts spending less time with his family, which affects the mother emotionally, who, in turn, wants time alone. Thus, she excludes her son, who, in turn, feels hurt and betrayed, like all children do. This explanation demonstrates the sudden changes in surroundings the innocent-eye narrator had to deal with. At this point in time, the boy is mentally immature. The 1st person narration allows readers to experience the loneliness felt by the boy firsthand. He clings to thoughts of his parents desperately. However, like all humans, the boy subconsciously adjusts his attitude and outlook to match his change in surroundings. In cases like this, the immature mature, and that is exactly what the boy does. The absence of his father, an archetypical leader, thrusts the burden of leadership into his hands.

When he sees his father after returning on the plane trip, he does not feel the sudden immature gush of joy, but instead he comprehends what is happening, and leaves it at that: “ I saw him finding us, seeing us for the first time… he was happy… then I felt full of joy and strength, it was like being angry, but much better, much much better. I saw him looking at us and he knew that I saw him, but I didn’t look back at him” (151-2). Although this is a complicated situation to analyze, here the boy seems to have matured.

Feelings of resentment towards the father’s absences are mixed with the gratitude for actually seeing his father. This internal conflict implies changes in the ways of thinking, and thus, progress on the road towards adulthood. A final reason that may cause readers to think that this story is a bildungsroman is because Gordimer uses dissonant narration; the boy reflects on changes that have been taking place in his family since his 12th birthday. Ultimately, for a person to be able to sit down and reflect on his/her past, he/she has to have matured over time, which is exactly what has happened to the boy in his attempts to adjust to his changing family environment.

However, not all characters adjust to a change in surroundings in the same way. Contrastingly, the father seems to lose maturity while noticing the changes his own adjustments bring upon the family. To highlight this juxtaposition of characters, the father and the son, Gordimer switches to 3rd person figural narration, though still remaining dissonant. At one point in time, the father has an affair, and this causes his opinions of his own family to change drastically. His wife, whom he most probably adored at one point, is now a desperate being who he does not admire anymore: “ she is coming home with a live baby. That flesh, that fact is what has resulted of one night when he returned from a weekend trip with that woman and was so angry at his wife’s forlornness, her need of comfort he couldn’t give, for something he couldn’t say, that he fucked her. It was not even good fucking because he had been making love to the other woman, rapturously, tenderly.

It was an act shameful to them both; his wife and himself” (154). Here, he obviously prefers the other woman to his wife; sex with her is love, but sex with his wife is crude. In “ Some Are Born to Sweet Delight”, 3rd person narration seemed to make the reflector more sympathetic, but in “ A Journey”, after reading in 1st person, 3rd person seems more detached and impersonal; readers relate less to the father than the son because, in general, the public’s sympathy resides with the more innocent: in this case, the son. Another reason why the father seems a lot less distinctive than the son is because he appears cynical; not only does he degrade his wife, but also his son. He states that “ the boy is not manly… has been spoilt – as he thinks of it, he doesn’t mean only in the sense of over-indulged as an only child… he sent her away with an immature thirteen-year-old as her only companion when his own place was with her” (156).

Here, he finds derogatory qualities in his son which he wouldn’t have noticed if he hadn’t had to deal with a family that vexingly used up the time he could have devoted to the “ other woman”. Here, Gordimer seems to be using the narrator to criticize the reflector by comparing what he should have done with what he actually did: actions which illustrate his regression from responsibility and maturity. Either way, Gordimer uses dissonant narration to show how the different characters had undergone changes to fit in with their surroundings; the son matures while the father lapses from maturity. In conclusion, narrative situation is vital to this story as well, but in a different way from “ Some Are Born to Sweet Delight”; both lead readers to desire the truth, but the former awaits a conclusion that will happen, and the latter refers to an account of what had happened.

Once again, Nadine Gordimer wishes to convey a theme, a statement about humankind in general, using narrative situation as a catalyst. In “ A Journey”, Gordimer compares narrator/reflector’s opinions to formulate that people are what they are made, not what they are born. Thus, change in a person’s surroundings usually causes him/her to change as well. Changes in the father and the son were evident; the former lost maturity while the latter gained it. As narrated, “ standing there, he [the father] throws his head back and gasps or laughs, and then pauses again before he will rush towards them, his wife, the baby, claim them. His cry flings a noose towards the boy. Catch! Catch! But the boy is looking at him with the face of a man, and turns back to the woman as if she is his woman, and the baby his begetting” (158).

Ultimately, the father realizes that his absence, caused by his “ gain” (of another woman), ironically, causes him to lose his son; he forfeits his position as head of the family, and he loses maturity. A reversal of roles is evident here, simply because Gordimer chooses a narrative situation in which the characters’ opinions and reflections are taken into account. Finally, just like in “ Some Are Born to Sweet Delight”, Gordimer chooses to refrain from narrating about a certain character, and thus, keeps readers in the dark. Just as Rad isn’t portrayed internally, the mother’s internal life is never revealed. To summarize, in “ A Journey”, Gordimer uses 1st person and 3rd person dissonant narration to put together the accounts of different characters to compile a coming of age story that is a powerful example of a world in which people undergo internal changes to adjust to external ones.

In conclusion, “ Some Are Born to Sweet Delight” and “ A Journey” are some of the finest short stories Nadine Gordimer has written, not because of flowery sentences or vivid descriptions, but because she brings her characters alive with the usage of narrative situation. Both the stories are similar in that they include a protagonist, normally the actual narrator or the focalizer, who is made sympathetic by usage of the most direct and/or personal form of narration in the story: Vera and the 13-year-old boy.

Similarly, there is either a foil character or an antagonist who is made less appealing due to the contrastingly impersonal narration used. Rad is alien to the reader because he is never described in a positive way, and the father is an undesirable character because he, quite plainly, shunted his duties as head of a family. He is alien to the 1st person narrator, and Rad is alien to the narrator in general. Finally, although the former short story focused on the future that is to come, and the latter focused on the past which had occurred, both used narrative situation to such an extent that it became vital to the plot. After reading both, it is evident that Nadine Gordimer is truly a master at creating lasting effects on readers.