Racism has always been a remarkable issue in the history of human world. In Nadine Gordimer’s short story “The Defeated,” we see two young girls living in a world where two cultures compete with one another. From one girl’s narration, we see social status obviously different from each other, the way they talk and think in totally different living environment. We see how native people are discriminated against and unfairly treated in that society. At first a sense of contempt is revealed accidentally; gradually, this feeling seems to be changed step by step; and finally it turns into a sense of sympathy for the loss of a friendship.

In many aspects, the two girls find themselves in struggle between two cultures. Miriam struggles between the culture which she lives with since she was little and the culture which the narrator is in. Miriam ought to be glad when the narrator smiles at her, but she hesitates because there’s an invisible line that separates them. The line means that they are supposed not to have any connection with each other, since the situation has been long remained in the same way they used to have, and perhaps this is why Miriam saunters. Miriam seemingly does not care how other people see her, how she behaves, and even how she might be looked down upon. But somehow it gives me the feeling that Miriam actually feels hurt while seeing how the narrator is treated in her own family and how lovely her home is. This characteristic which Miriam embodies is perhaps just a disguise, so that she can be brave enough to face her inferiority. Perhaps she always looks insensitive to the difference between the narrator and herself, but it may just be that she does not want to recognize the truth that she is inferior; she has to keep up her own sense of dignity. Later on, she is gradually changed as she grows up, for this pressure indeed remains in her mind and urges her to pursue
a sense of belonging to the higher social status. It seems she is eagerly trying to make herself fit into that higher class and erases the image of her lower class.

As for the narrator, she is influenced by both her own culture and Miriam’s culture. She is supposed to live in a high culture that is undisturbed by other lower culture. Nevertheless, the lower culture is a world that she is interested to explore, partly because her parents often leave her at home alone, which makes her lonely and needs company, and probably that is also why she is attracted to the culture totally different from hers to fill up the emptiness in her heart. She is fascinated by the bustling streets and the people living and working there, which really give her a culture shock. She adapts herself to the way Miriam lives, even though quite amazed at first. She is supposed not to have any relation with Miriam, but she feels a strong appeal to her and her world. She is constantly shifting between these two cultures, observing their differences.

The friendship between Miriam and the narrator is rare and commendable, since there is an invisible line existing between their worlds of different background. It is this line that separates them from getting to know each other earlier. Fortunately, one of them breaks the ice first and leads to communication with the other. They become friends mainly on the narrator’s initiative with a simple condescending smile. At this point I suddenly realize that a simple smile can overcome almost all barriers in life. There ought to be someone who steps out first to show a sign of friendliness, then other persons could open up their heart to respond. For a white girl to make friends with a black girl would be especially difficult at that time and in that social background. It is indeed incredible that in such a situation a sincere friendship develops between them, and the friendship has been cherished by both for a long time. Their friendship gets stable day by day: first the narrator gives Miriam a smile, and then Miriam asks the narrator to go inside the Concession store. The gap between them seems to be bridged up.
There once seems to be a time when the two could enjoy genuine friendship that crosses over racial borderline, a friendship that could break up the discrimination between white and black people; however, when the story ends, it takes the ordinary route of failure. In the end nothing changes very much to Miriam’s parents, only their hope and will for life has been torn down. They remain silent as their lives go on, perhaps even more humble than ever. Miriam still has to struggle with her life, confronting conflict in two different cultures. She has to choose to live up to the standards of the world she has just succeeded in being admitted by marrying a doctor, rather than to live in the same way as she used to. Still, she cannot get out of that mud, and she sinks in an uncertain way. Ultimately, their friendship fades away, though it should have been be a wonderful memory in each other’s life. After all, what really matters is the process that is beautiful, despite the end might be not that perfect as one may imagine.

Besides, there is a cultural difference between the black and white people in their attitude toward education. Though it is not clearly told in this story, we can perceive that the narrator’s parents have certainly received good education. Thus, education does not really mean a problem to them. They are also able to give good education to their children, since they can afford it. So, when the narrator indicates her intention of going to university, her parents certainly agree to that. In contrast, Miriam’s parents receive very little or even no education at all, and that’s why they expect much of Miriam and are especially proud of her. They always do their best to provide Miriam an environment for study. They even whisper whenever Miriam is doing schoolwork, for fear of disturbing her. When Miriam mentions of going to university, they worry deeply about the money. While they frown, Miriam looks indifferent in attitude, as if it were none of her own business. It is really a sad phenomenon. It seems that the only thing her parents can do is to take that as an oracle, and have to work even much harder to make enough money to support her. It becomes indeed a struggle for her parents, not for Miriam. How ironic it is when Miriam says “they’ll find the money”! Isn’t it supposed to be that as children we should be considerate of our parents’ condition and share
the burden with them? However, for Miriam, she does not worry about that at all, as though it had nothing to do with her. Miriam is spoiled perhaps. She seems to take for granted whatever her parents do for her, believing that her parents ought to do everything for her, making money for her education no matter how hard they have to work and how tired they are. We do not see anything Miriam does for her parents. What we sense is that she does not have empathy for her parents. Probably she might feel a little guilty somehow in her mind; still, she does not show it and we cannot see it clearly, for most of the time Miriam is ashamed of her family and her lower status.

Moreover, there is sadness existing between Miriam and her parents. There seems to be a generation gap between them. As her parents know nothing and speak very poor English, Miriam, nevertheless, is well-educated and can speak English well. This might be why Miriam looks down upon her parents, which causes her to feel ashamed of introducing her parents to her husband. Furthermore, she seldom goes back to visit her parents. They become a shameful secret that should be hidden from her husband and his circle, because of their lower social class.

There is an interesting question about “The defeated.” Perhaps not only the parents and the native are defeated, but also Miriam and the narrator herself. There seems to be no more hope for changing the situation they are now. They are even more defeated than ever. It is useless to fight, and silence is all they got. As time passes, what they have is an even sadder world. Miriam seems successful; however, she is defeated somehow by the society and by herself too. She was ashamed of her family, culture, environment, and condition, and that’s what makes her eager to integrate herself to another and better world. She is defeated when trying to mix with the main stream in that society, trying to escape from what she has been suffered for so long. Miriam loses what she should keep when she tries to float with the main stream and to stay away her older world. As for the narrator, she is defeated by her helplessness to stop this situation from worsening. She abandons her favorite career as a teacher, and goes to other
country to be as a nurse in field hospital. Time flies, things remain the same, but people change and worsen. Everyone is defeated by the invariable rules set by the society. Standards of value keep changing faster than it used to be. Life is not an easy climb in such a society. It is hard and bitter under the pressure of competition and survival. In the end, there seems to be left only a sense of coldness, depression, and loneliness. There is little warmth or fairness in this society. Even though there is, it flickers in a quick flash.