Over the past forty years, Nadine Gordimer has emerged as the most resourceful writer to have distilled fiction from the experience of apartheid. Her international literary eminence is complemented by her role within South Africa as an activist in the culture of resistance, and an articulate opponent of censorship, detention without trial, and Bantu education, and as an assiduous organizer of writers across the racial divide. Augmenting Gordimer’s importance is the parallel between the beginnings of her career and the rise to power of the Afrikaner-dominated National Party, which has ruled South Africa uninterrupted since 1948. Her nine novels, more than two hundred short stories, and numerous essays of political and literary commentary thus offer a uniquely imaginative record of the high era of apartheid. This record gains depth from Gordimer’s acute sensitivity to the history of her times. Among contemporary writers in English she displays an unequaled ability to integrate the shifting political moods of her society into the very form and texture of her fiction.

Gordimer has forged her considerable oeuvre out of circumstances that combined privilege and embattlement. This situation required of her an uncommon imaginative resilience. At home she has endured challenges from right and left flanks: the state banned several of her novels (most notoriously Burger’s Daughter [1979]), while during the heyday of black consciousness in the 1970’s, many black authors dismissed all white writing as a luxurious irrelevance. In the United States, Gordimer has had occasion to fend off the reverse criticism: that her engagement with politics and her socialist convictions have restricted her literary vision. In accruing her reputation, Gordimer has never skirted controversy; she has steered an awkward course between those readers who crave more commitment and those who cry for less, with the censors, breathing heavily, seldom far behind. These pressures, for the most part, have helped her to hone her fiction and have led her to reflect profoundly on questions of artistic answerability. A localized but never provincial writer, Gordimer has garnered strength from an international cast of authors who have felt compelled, in the midst of social turbulence or when confronted by pronounced injustice, to pursue artistic freedom by exercising social responsibility: Bertolt Brecht, Albert Camus, Ernesto Cardenale, Milan Kundera, Czeslaw Milosz, and Ivan Turgenev, among others. It was Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle (1906) that first stirred Gordimer to think about politics; the critics to whom she has been most attentive include Walter Benjamin, Ernest Fischer, Antonio Gramsci, and György Lukács, all of whom are associated with Marxist philosophies.

At first glance, Gordimer’s attitude toward commitment may appear divided against itself. She insists that only Burger’s Daughter, from among her novels, embodies an expressly political intent. Yet by the same token, she observes, as Stephen Clingman records in The Novels of Nadine Gordimer, that “politics is character in South Africa” (p. 10) -- a determining pressure rather than an arbitrary backdrop. The best clue to her resolution of these positions occurs in her dense, suggestive piece, “The Essential Gesture,” collected in the eponymous 1988 volume of critical writing. There Gordimer argues that a writer in her position can best fulfill her responsibility, not by contracting
into orthodoxy, but through delving into the uncertainties of imaginative risk. The integrity of that risk taking is a version of answerability, though always a lesser one than the extraliterary pursuit of social justice. Gordimer’s South African experience taught her to be equally skeptical of a sense of creative obligation on the one hand and, on the other, of a view of writers as pure, individual sensibilities flying free of ideology.

In that 1984 essay and in an autobiographical fragment written some twenty years earlier, Gordimer makes a limpid distinction between her own literary genesis and that of many black South African writers: “The problems of my country did not set me writing; on the contrary, it was learning to write that sent me falling, falling through the surface of the South African way of life” (Essential Gesture, p. 26). By contrast, those directly oppressed by apartheid often achieve a cleaner synthesis of creativity and social responsibility, because “it is out of being ‘more than a writer’ that many black men and women in South Africa begin to write” (Essential Gesture, p. 290). Gordimer’s literary ambitions, then, predated any alertness to politics; indeed, the initial impetus to write was provided more by her mother’s perversity than by the singular deviances of apartheid.

Gordimer was born on 20 November 1923 in Springs, a gold-mining town of stifling provinciality that lies to the east of Johannesburg. Her Jewish parents diverged widely in background and demeanor. At thirteen, her father fled a Lithuanian village where czarist anti-Semitism barred him from attending high school. In Springs he learned watch making and opened a jeweler’s shop. Gordimer portrays him as a man of arrested emotional development who, despite childhood immersion in poverty, educational deprivation, and bigotry, disappointed her deeply with his recalcitrant racism toward black South Africans. The more profound influence was Gordimer’s English-born mother, a woman whose ample creativity had been denied adequate professional outlets. Gordimer speaks of her as the dominant member of the household and a sincere do-gooder who founded a day-care center in a nearby black township.

When she learned that Nadine had an enlarged thyroid (a common, unproblematic ailment) she barred her from all outdoor activity and withdrew her, aged eleven, permanently from school. Thereafter, Gordimer suffered an education of erratic tutoring and never gained a high school diploma. Not until she was thirty did she ferret out the motives behind her mother’s exaggerated reaction: miserably married, she had been in love with the family doctor and had used her daughter’s “illness” to maximize contact with him and pursue a never-consummated relationship. Thus she had guaranteed Nadine a damaged, friendless childhood, in which the company of books became an attractive alternative to the company of small-town adults. In this way, a mother’s selfishness inadvertently prodded a daughter toward a literary vocation.

**Early Work**

Her mother’s insistence that she be tutored within the confines of home meant that Gordimer lacked the qualifications for admission to a university. Commuting from Springs, she audited courses for one year at the University of Witwatersrand, an institution in whose intellectual life she would later feature prominently. Despite her limited formal education, however, Gordimer had been publishing stories since the age of fifteen. But it was not until 1949, the year of both her first marriage and her permanent move to Johannesburg, that she broke through in literary terms. In that benchmark year she had a story appear in *The New Yorker* for the first time — the beginning of a long association with the magazine and the first hint of her international standing. 1949 saw, too, her
inaugural book in print, a collection entitled *Face to Face: Short Stories*. That volume, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent and Other Stories* (1952), and her first novel, *The Lying Days* (1953), retain interest principally as measures of the distance, political and aesthetic, that Gordimer traversed. Helen Shaw of *The Lying Days* faces the classic colonial dilemma pondered by writers as diverse as Olive Schreiner, V. S. Naipaul, Patrick White, and Katherine Mansfield. How is she to read (and by analogy, how is Gordimer to render) her inadequately imagined society? Those around Helen point overseas to “home,” while nothing in her imported European reading can ratify the reality of her immediate life. Apartheid exacerbates Helen’s intimations of artificiality: she awakes to horror upon witnessing the police shoot a black protestor, but she remains estranged from the possibility of taking action. Her gender, too, conspires to keep her a spectator in a world in which agency is the prerogative of swaggering men. *The Lying Days* discloses Gordimer’s intuitive sense of the turbulence South Africa underwent in the thirties and forties as a result of rapid industrialization and the National Party’s ascent to power. But as yet Gordimer lacked the historical knowledge to secure her intuitions, and the novel, like Helen, seems somewhat adrift in a sea of vague revolt, unanchored by imaginative or ideological conviction.

In South African memory, Sophiatown is both a place and a time. During the 1950’s—dubbed by writer Lewis Nkosi “the fabulous decade”—a ghetto in Johannesburg became the hub of a cultural renaissance led by black journalists, writers, jazz players, and intellectuals. *A World of Strangers* (1958) is Gordimer’s Sophiatown novel, an engaged yet skeptical testament to an era whose heady bohemianism would be devastated by the government’s bulldozing of Sophiatown and terminated, in 1960, by the Sharpeville massacre. As evidenced by *A World of Strangers*, Sophiatown became, for a thin stratum of middle-class blacks and whites, a center for conscientious multiracialism, often in an atmosphere of strained bonhomie. Flouting taboos, notably through interracial drinking and sex, became both a style of life and a surrogate politics.

*A World of Strangers* stages a preliminary, ambiguous assessment of the prospects of liberal good will (with a gloss of hedonism) as a reforming influence on apartheid. The novel’s perspective is that of Toby Hood, an English visitor who becomes charmed by Sophiatown’s penumbral verve, a welcome counter to the cheerlessness of white Johannesburg. The bookish Toby alludes several times to E. M. Forster’s cross-cultural novels; indeed, *A World of Strangers* is shadowed by Forster’s exploration of the limits of individual decency before the violence of colonial domination. Toby’s cool detachment and his liberty to play the outsider are undermined by the death of his closest black friend when the police raid a speakeasy. The killing exposes the false parity of a relationship conducted under circumstances of skewed racial power; the fantasy of occupying, through friendship, a magic circle outside apartheid, degenerates into culpable sentimentality.

Gordimer advances this theme further in *Occasion for Loving* (1963). Here, the shimmering promise of transcendent intimacy arises not from male friendship but from (in South African argot) “sex across the color bar.” Recalling her own bravado during the fifties, Gordimer remarks in an interview in *Paris Review*, ”I felt that all I needed, in my own behavior, was to ignore and defy the color bar. In other words my own attitude toward blacks seemed to be sufficient action” (p. 93). In Gordimer’s callow confidence in attitude serving as a proxy for activism, one discerns an extension of her mother’s assiduous charity toward blacks. Indeed, in exposing the hazards of liberal paternalism, *Occasion for Loving* simultaneously works through the manipulative mother-daughter relationship of Gordimer’s upbringing. The emergence of a love triangle among the English visitor, Ann Davis, her white South African husband, Boaz, and a black artist, Gideon Shibalo, is observed
through the novel’s principal figure, Jessie Stilwell. Jessie’s mother deceived her into believing she had a “bad heart” as a way of denying her self-reliance and easing her mother’s loneliness. Gordimer thereby probes the analogies between the crippling dependencies induced by the family and those engendered by apartheid.

*Occasion for Loving* enters a long tradition of Southern African literature centered on the traumas of miscegenation, a tradition stretching from William Plomer’s *Turbott Wolfe* (1925) and Sarah Gertrude Millin’s *God’s Step-Children* (1924) to Doris Lessing’s *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), Alan Paton’s *Too Late the Phalarope* (1953), Richard Rive’s *Emergency* (1964), Nkosi’s *Mating Birds* (1983), and Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona’s collaborative play, *Statements After an Arrest Under the Immorality Act* (1972). But Gordimer’s novel cuts across the prevailing tendency in this literature to celebrate the fidelity of love or desire in the face of dehumanizing laws. For in the final instance, Ann recoils from her black lover and flees the country, husband in tow, whereupon the lovelorn, abandoned Gideon slumps into bitterness and alcoholism. Gordimer’s third novel thus adds a twist of tragedy to the closing scene of *A World of Strangers* in which Toby, departing for England, promises to revisit South Africa. At this his jazz musician friend chides: “Who knows with you people, Toby, man? Maybe you won’t come back at all. Something will keep you away. Something will prevent you...” (p. 266). In both novels, Gordimer—by this stage steeped in Jean Paul Sartre and Camus—gives great play to the *mauvaise foi* of return-ticket intimacy. Middle-class whites dabbling in multiracialism, she suggests, often make impossible emotional demands of blacks, who remain fenced in by absent alternatives.

In terms of a long view of Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* initiates her questioning of the routine dichotomy between personal integrity and the warped laws of the public domain:

There was no recess of being, no emotion so private that white privilege did not single you out there; it was a silver spoon clamped between your jaws and you might choke on it for all the chance there was of dislodging it. So long as the law remained unchanged, nothing could bring integrity to personal relationships. (p. 279)

Ineluctably, the law becomes not only an imposition on human relations but, in refracted form, a psychological emanation that affects even those who oppose it.

**The Middle Years**

From the outset, Gordimer’s prose manifested descriptive skills almost unexampled among contemporary writers. Yet, as the author herself concedes, in the early novels, her narrative command would sometimes slacken to episodic effect. Given the controlled brilliance of her short story writing and her narrative difficulties over longer stretches, it is not surprising that her most immaculate work of fiction, *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966), should assume the compressed form of a novella. *Burger’s Daughter* is ultimately a more ambitious and momentous work, but nothing in Gordimer’s oeuvre surpasses the sustained prose power and self-assurance of *The Late Bourgeois World*.

The book emerged out of the political gloom. By the time *Occasion for Loving* appeared in 1963, the energy and hope associated with the defiance campaigns of the fifties had already begun to
attenuate. A further three years of bannings, censorship, new racist laws, infiltrations, assassinations, mass trials, and hangings guaranteed that resistance would reach its nadir.

The novella’s compelling title is drawn from Ernst Fischer’s *The Necessity of Art* (1963), a Marxist critique of the alienated aestheticism that Fischer sees as symptomatic of the decay of community into fragmented individualism. Arguing for the original utility of art, Fischer urges that society recover its vision by unearthing the possibilities in art for collective transformation. This idea is of direct significance to the tone and debates of Gordimer’s novella as, out of the futureless despair of the mid-sixties, she aspires to conceive of fitting aesthetic and political forms of responsibility. In so doing, she avoids sanctimonious distinctions between the bourgeois and revolutionaries. The novella’s most prominent activist, Max Van Den Sandt, blurs such categories as he conducts a lifelong revolt against his elitist family under the banner of political radicalism. A saboteur in a splinter sect, he gets detained, betrays his comrades to the state, and takes his own life. It is important that *The Late Bourgeois World* not be misconstrued as opposing revolutionary practice; rather, it assails weak individuals like Max whose self-absorbed flirtation with revolution is reactive, romantic humbug that incriminates him as part of the detritus of the age.

The novella launches itself from two complementary epigraphs: Franz Kafka ‘s “There are possibilities for me, certainly; but under what stone do they lie?” and Maxim Gorky’s epigrammatic “The madness of the brave is the wisdom of life.” These apply directly to Max’s estranged wife, Liz, the novella’s narrator. How, in a draconian climate in which liberal decencies are straws in the wind, is she to move beyond quietism and despair? In keeping with Gordimer’s developing socialist convictions and with the titular allusion to Fischer, the tentative answer, instead of emerging from the realm of private morality, assumes the form of economic redress. A black revolutionary, Luke Fokase, implores Liz to find a bank account through which his organization can channel overseas funds undetected. Liz dismisses his request, then recalls that she possesses power of attorney over the account of her senile, ailing grandmother, who lives off the dividends of mining shares passed down through the family. Given that the apartheid laws are rooted in the exploitative economy of mining, Liz’s decision to abuse her authority over the account (at least in terms of bourgeois morality) can be read as a way of commandeering the spoils of apartheid to bring about the system’s demise. In a sense, Liz dislodges *Occasion for Loving’s* choking silver spoon and puts it to good use.

During the late sixties and early seventies, Gordimer began to deliberate with fresh intensity her position on the African continent. This preoccupation surfaces in closely observed travel essays on Ghana, Botswana, the Ivory Coast, and Madagascar; in *Livingstone’s Companions* (1971), a lively collection of stories exploring post- and neo-colonial conditions north of the border; and in the critical work, *The Black Interpreters: Notes on African Writing* (1973).

In the year prior to publication of *Livingstone’s Companions*, Gordimer brought out *A Guest of Honour*, an epic novel and her only one set in its entirety beyond the confines of South Africa. For her purposes, she devised a Central African country, drawn largely from the example of Zambia, in the throes of excited postindependence debate and political maneuvering. Gordimer’s venturesome break with her long-established setting is both typical of her resourcefulness · liberating her imaginatively from the staleness of late-sixties South Africa · and, paradoxically, less of a break than it might at first appear. By the time Gordimer embarked on *A Guest of Honour*, the state’s imposition of apartheid had suffocated all significant revolt. But an explosive tension developed between the mood, in South Africa, of directionless despair, and the heady expectations in Africa at large, as one
country after another gained its independence. In both *A Guest of Honour* and *The Conservationist* (1974), Gordimer works the unstable territory between apartheid’s internal supremacy and its intensifying regional isolation.

*A Guest of Honour* opens with Colonel Evelyn James Bray, a retired colonial official, invited back to an unnamed Central African country for the birth of its independence. Bray’s African reputation is high; while purportedly serving the British crown, he had the prescience to advance the anticolonial cause of the People’s Independence Party, led by Adamson Mweta and Edward Shinza. Such insubordination prompted his expulsion. Now Bray returns to a different nation; the opposition has fractured into rivalry over power, and he is forced to take sides between his two friends and his political allies. Although Bray is the ruling Mweta’s guest, he finds himself increasingly drawn to the arguments of the African socialist Shinza, who aligns himself with the interests of the poor rural populace and the workers in the heavily centralized mines and fishing industries.

Extending her fascination, begun in *The Late Bourgeois World*, with the economic underpinnings of politics, Gordimer plays off Mweta’s policies, which subordinate the national interest to the whims of the international mining magnates, against Shinza’s conviction that the president has been reduced to “the black watchman standing guard outside the white man’s enterprise” (p. 488). When Mweta ships in mercenaries to smash internal dissent, Bray determines to travel to Europe to raise arms for Shinza. This traumatic decision, by a presidential guest with a distaste for violence, bears comparison with Liz’s choice, at the close of *The Late Bourgeois World*, between the conventions of her inherited morality and the pressure to act. Bray’s wracking decision is prefigured in the two epigraphs to the novel. His options lie stretched between opposing conceptions of bravery, between the lonely, principled doubt of Turgenev’s “An honourable man will end by not knowing where to live” and Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s insistence that action requires simple beliefs: “Many will call me an adventurer · and that I am, only of a different sort · one of those who risks his skin to prove his platitudes.”

While fleeing the country, Bray is trapped in an ambush and is murdered by the very forces he sought to aid, as Shinza’s men mistake him for a German mercenary. The irony is immense but not supreme. Just as Gordimer exploded Max’s naive idealism so as to explore tougher forms of radicalism, she has Bray killed, not as a form of comeuppance for romantic meddling, but to demonstrate that in the muddy waters of politics principled action should not anticipate personal reward. Bray’s lover insists that Bray would have comprehended his death. The force of Gordimer’s critique is directed not against Bray, but against the old colonials who would view him as “a martyr to savages” (p. 503) and against *Time*– and *Newsweek*-style travesties of the events.

Gordimer typically refuses to simplify her characters lives by segregating their exploration of ideological dilemmas from their anguished and often contradictory immersion in sexual and familial politics. On this score, *A Guest of Honour* is no exception. The novel’s dialogue contains some discussion of Wilhelm Reich’s ideas about the authoritarian personality and, as Judie Newman determines in her study of Gordimer, there is broader evidence that Gordimer was intrigued by Reich’s efforts to reconcile Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. A crucial subtext of the novel traces the new nation’s ominous failure, despite the rituals of independence, to break with a vision of the leader as “father of the state” (p. 15). Gordimer’s wariness of the crossover between familial and authoritarian models of government has proved prescient: “strong man rule has repeatedly dogged
neocolonial African states. Her foresight is revealed, too, in the novel’s adhering to the principles of African socialism while exposing the immense obstacles blocking their application, and marking not the triumph of those beliefs but their convoluted deferral.

_A Guest of Honour_ ranks with Chinua Achebe’s _A Man of the People_ (1966), Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s _Petals of Blood_ (1977), and Paule Marshall’s _The Chosen Place, The Timeless People_ (1969), as one of the great fictional renditions of the all-too-common demise of _uhuru_ (freedom) into neocolonialism. Gordimer’s book stands, too, as a formidable novel of ideas; while never formulaic, it integrates strong currents of contemporary radical thought. Gordimer has spoken of her immersion, at the time, not just in Reich, but also in the political philosophies of Frantz Fanon, Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, and Amilcar Cabral, all alluded to over the course of the novel. Her alertness to such thinking deepens her exploration of the often contradictory structures of dependency and revolt, a subject she would pursue further in _Burger’s Daughter_.

Between these two huge works lies the experimental, relatively slight achievement of _The Conservationist_. Like much of Gordimer’s previous fiction, the novel explores questions of white belonging. But the titular character, Mehring, emerges as the antithesis of Bray, no self-acknowledged guest of honor, but someone whose ownership of a farm and surface command of its black tenants obscure his deeply alienated relation to the earth and its denizens.

Gordimer’s title is charged with irony. Mehring fancies himself a tender of nature, someone who nurtures God’s earth in order that future generations may enjoy the fruits of the past. As such, he stands for all self-appointed guardians of that ominous anachronism, “the South African way of life,” which romanticizes the farm and outdoor living in an ambience of white supremacy. The irony is redoubled when it becomes apparent that Mehring is simply a prominent industrialist, a weekend farmer with a squanderous, absentee relationship to the land. He represents not the old style rural Afrikaner, imprisoned by his laager mentality, but the new, worldly wise corporate white who rose to prominence during the economic boom of the late sixties. Thus Mehring sentimentalizes playing the farmer between business trips to Japan. Gordimer exposes, in the process, the extent to which the conservation of the “age-old,” white way of life, entails—to borrow Terrence Ranger and Eric Hobsbawm’s phrase—the elaborate, self-deceiving “invention of tradition.”

In the annals of colonialism, the expropriation of the land has been reiteratively characterized through sexual registers—virgin territory, penetration, rape. Gordimer positions _The Conservationist_ in a subversive relationship to this tendency, for, in the fullest sense of the phrase, it is a book about land lust. Under circumstances in which apartheid has reserved 87 percent of the country for white ownership, Mehring’s flirtation with farming is really a species of proprietary onanism. Despite his preoccupation with conservation, Mehring’s life is wholly unregenerative: divorced and politically estranged from his son (who is, moreover, indifferent to the farm), he spends much of his waking life in fantasy monologues with a long-lost girlfriend. He inhabits an issueless world that forebodes white disinheritance. The novel closes with Mehring about to copulate with a woman hitchhiker when an ominous, never-to-be-identified male figure approaches. Mehring’s panicked thoughts give precise expression to his mental bracketing of property and sex, while pointing equally to his inevitable abandonment:

He’s going to leave her to them ... he’s going to make a dash for it, a leap, sell the place to the first offer. ... He’s going to run, run and leave them to rape her and rob
her. She’ll be all right. They survive everything. Coloured or poor-white, whichever she is, their brothers or fathers take their virginity good and early. They can have it, the whole four hundred acres. (p. 250)

Were *The Conservationist* solely a novel about Mehring, it would be limited to a critique of a barren ethos. But, as we have seen from *A Guest of Honour*, in this phase of her work Gordimer was reaching for affirmative values. These she had located, in that earlier novel, in African socialism. To offset Mehring’s life-threatening values with a spirit of renewal, Gordimer had to turn to another black tradition, in a manner that illuminates a representational crisis endemic to white South African literature. Novelist J. M. Coetzee remarks, in his essay collection, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, upon “the uneasy set of options” (p. 5) that have dogged white literary representation of blacks from the eighteenth century onward. Most often, the texts of European visitors and white settlers have effaced blacks from the landscape or fused them with it. Ever since, one might extrapolate, white writers have had to choose between the sins of omission and the sins of presumption. But of all white South African writers, Gordimer has ventured most convincingly into black characterization—notably in *A World of Strangers, Occasion for Loving, The Late Bourgeois World, A Guest of Honour*, and *Burger’s Daughter*. Yet in all these works, she draws on her extensive exposure to township culture and her friendships with the urban bohemians and political leaders, with whom she shares significant values. When her writing shifts, as in *The Conservationist* and later, *July’s People* (1981), to a rural locale, her predicament becomes more complex, for she draws on a shallow reservoir of common experience. In class terms, the Bantustan peasantry and farmhands are remote from her, while characterization is further complicated by her linguistic estrangement from them, as very little English is spoken in the countryside. It is understandable, therefore, that the depiction of blacks in *The Conservationist* should take a symbolic turn. Indeed, the novel’s most powerful black presence is a biologically silent but mythologically articulate corpse.

Early in the narrative, the body of a murdered man disturbs the Africans on Mehring’s farm; the corpse is given a cursory, indifferent burial, without the proper observances. That body remains a force throughout and, by the close, has been unearthed by a portentous storm in a gesture that intimates the return both of the white psyche’s repressed and apartheid’s oppressed. Gordimer reinforces this vision of cyclical revival through a contrapuntal design, alternating between the throttled narcissism of Mehring’s mind (a state accentuated by her deployment of stream of consciousness) and citations from Zulu mythology. These, as Judie Newman has shown, Gordimer garnered from Henry Callaway’s *The Religious System of the Amazulu*. From this ingenious opposition flows a series of reversals. The conservationist is bereft of a tradition to conserve, while his tenants dwell in a present animated by precolonial rituals, a present that opens out onto the future. Likewise, the degenerate Mehring is evacuated of life, while the mysterious black cadaver, swept up in rituals of regeneration, comes to incarnate the living body politic.

Notwithstanding its subtlety of craft and the fact that it earned Gordimer Britain’s prestigious Booker Prize, *The Conservationist* seems too detached to rank among the author’s finest writing. On the one hand, Mehring, of all her leading protagonists, lies furthest from her sympathies; on the other, the narrative’s affirmative impulse is borne by mythological ciphers. I say ciphers, because the anthropological extraction of the myth from oral tradition followed by its subsequent translation into novelistic form depletes its energy. Thus, overall, Gordimer’s intelligence of design often seems eerily uninhabited. The limitations of *The Conservationist* are best dramatized by the
remarkable books that succeeded it: Selected Stories (1975) and Burger’s Daughter (1979), Gordimer’s seventh novel and indubitably her most commanding work.

**SHORT STORIES**

One might never guess, from the criticism on Gordimer, that her energies have been split equally between short stories and novels. The former are not even touched upon in the two finest studies of her fiction—by Judie Newman and Stephen Clingman—and are, in general, left critically remaindered as if they were five-finger exercises. Yet, as Selected Stories amply demonstrates, in the briefer form Gordimer does more than limber up for the real performance, often achieving effects unattainable in the novels. Had she never gone on to produce three further collections of short stories, her 1975 selection, drawn from five volumes and spanning the first thirty years of her career, would have been sufficient to mark her as one of the most versatile exponents of the genre since Chekhov.

Technical and political factors have given an edge to her aptitude for the form. I have suggested that Gordimer’s acute powers of observation are not always matched by a corresponding level of narrative control. Over the shorter stretch her pacing is invariably infallible, as she writes with a secure sense of the destiny of her material. Indeed, many of the most intense portions of her novels read like self-contained short stories: one thinks, for instance, of the much anthologized excerpt from Burger’s Daughter, where Rosa witnesses an old black man brutalizing a donkey and recognizes that she has no conception of how to live or intervene in her own country.

In her introduction to Selected Stories, Gordimer remarks on the androgynous ambition behind her writing, her deeply felt need to move freely between female and male points of view. Few contemporary novelists hazard the range of governing perspectives found in her novels · from the male Oxbridge journalist in A World of Strangers to the daughter of a South African communist in Burger’s Daughter; from the reprehensible farmer-cum-industrialist in The Conservationist to the idealized, globe-trotting single mother who weds an African head of state in A Sport of Nature. All the same, it is in Gordimer’s two-hundred-odd short stories that she truly gets to chance new vantage points. One can surely read her restless quest for diverse perspectives as a form of defiance, a way of transgressing the bounds of her segregated society, charting people and places who are not meant to be on her experiential or imaginative maps. To get an inkling of the social range across which she remains affecting, one need only read in succession “The Last Kiss” (1960), “Which New Era Would That Be?” (1956), “Something for the Time Being,” (1960), and “A City of the Dead, A City of the Living” (1982). The finest of her individual collections, Not for Publication (1965), offers a compact sample of her daring, versatile powers of empathy. “A Chip of Glass Ruby” probes the tension between an Indian woman who throws herself into the Defiance Campaigns and her admiring but politically cautious husband. “Some Monday for Sure” is narrated by a black refugee who escapes South Africa by walking halfway across the continent after becoming involved in a sabotage operation. A lonely white garage clerk tells her story in “Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants.” When an itinerant mercenary exploits her badly, the woman becomes wholly reliant on the “bossboy” as her confidant, but is unable to recognize that dependence. Gordimer thereby stages a brilliant inquiry into the character of “ordinary” lower-middle-class racism.

Gordimer’s proficiency for the shorter form has helped her press further than any other South African writer toward overcoming the deprivation that comes of legislated isolation. Yet, just
as her childhood passion for writing preceded any alertness to politics, so too, her first awareness of alienation stemmed not from apartheid but from her sense of being a bookish, housebound freak of a girl in a boorish mining town. This early sense of her own deviance and her ostracism has given a rich resonance to her writing on the subject, when, with maturity, she came to delve into the alienating effects of racial segregation.

Gordimer has remarked how, as an adolescent, she achieved communion through the body, not the mind, which remained sealed in reverie and intellectual solitude. Shared sexual attraction became her “Rapunzel’s hair,” whereby she could periodically enter the lives around her. Unlike many authors best known for their political obsessions—V. S. Naipaul being a notable example—Gordimer has never been awkward or skittish around sexual themes. She can be profoundly insightful into what she has called “the blankness of concealed distress” (Selected Stories, p. 65) that shrouds sexual desire in a repressive society. “A Bit of Young Life” (1956) and “A Company of Laughing Faces” (1965) both evoke, from youthful perspectives, the heavy shame and ineluctably private bewilderment that weigh on any woman who risks sexual spontaneity. In the later short stories, like those gathered in A Soldier’s Embrace (1980), Gordimer’s earlier fixation with her society’s punishment of callow errancy gives way to some excellent writing on the frayed, weary sexuality of late middle age. “Time Did,” narrated by a woman whose husband has just confessed his infidelities, is the finest of these.

As Occasion for Loving reveals at length, to trespass sexually “across the color bar” is to enter a zone of concentrated trauma, where the personal and the political meet head-on. Several of the short stories continue to approach miscegenation as symbolic revolt— the orgasm as guerrilla sortie— or vicious power play. If interracial sex sometimes lapses into theatrical illegality, Gordimer intimates that it can also be the place where interracial trust is won, whereas the best-intentioned of friendships often buckle beneath the strains of the segregated public domain. Thus Gordimer’s early experience of the body as Rapunzel’s hair, as a way out of solipsism, is revived in scenes of interracial intimacy, principally between black men and white women.

As the critic Dorothy Driver has observed, Gordimer “seldom focuses exclusively on a black consciousness engaged with itself rather than with a white world.” Given the lineaments of Gordimer’s experience, this tendency is scarcely surprising; indeed, to write otherwise might well be judged presumptuous. However, it is significant that her fascination with those border zones of interracial contact seldom extends beyond encounters between black men and white women. Her black women invariably seem less fully imagined than her men and are usually left with walk-on parts. Even the exception to this rule, Aila in My Son’s Story, remains somewhat abstractly sketched and lacks the intimacy of Gideon Shibelo (Occasion for Loving), Luke Fokase (The Late Bourgeois World), and Sonny (My Son’s Story). Gordimer’s inability to generate resonant black female characters stems in part from the composition of the interracial circles in which she moved: black women were poorly represented among the bohemians, intellectuals, political leaders, and other professional classes. Moreover, Gordimer’s insistence on sexual chemistry as a crucial catalyst for interracial communication, meant that, in autobiographical terms, she accrued the confidence to portray black men to a degree that she never achieved with black women.

Yet the most powerful of all the obsessive concerns in the shorter fiction is Gordimer’s indictment of white society’s inability to think beyond racial paranoia. This failure of imagination has produced a travesty of community, a community most intimate through its shared fears. The newly
independent Africa of Livingstone’s Companions (1971) issues successive challenges to that community of dread, most forcefully in “The African Magician,” a tale narrated by a colonial on a river trip down the Congo. When a local conjurer appears on board and hypnotizes his assistants, the whites seek to expose his charlatanism by challenging him to test his powers on one of their number. Instantly, he binds a young white woman in a spell, producing in her a beatific abandonment of will:

She had never made such a gesture to her husband, or any man. She had never stood like that before her father—none of us has. How can I explain? One of the disciples might have come before Christ like that. There was the peace of absolute trust in it. it stirred a needle of fear in me—more than that, for a moment I was horribly afraid; and how can I explain that, either? For it was beautiful, and I have lived in Africa all my life and know them, us, the white people. To see it was beautiful would make us dangerous. (p. 258)

When prejudices become so settled, the threat of trust breaking out—the threat of human recognition—becomes much more disturbing than danger itself. Indeed, from “Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?” (1953) to “Something Out There” (1984) and “Once Upon a Time” (1989), Gordimer suggests that the true peril emanates from within a community that is self-besieged. “Once Upon a Time” conveys this conviction brilliantly. A fairy tale of suburban life set in the era of President P. W. Botha’s “total onslaught,” it points up the paradox of security, how an obsession with protecting a style of life eventually becomes a surrogate life-style, displacing or eroding the very comforts it was intended to secure. The most vocal inhabitants of the story’s Johannesburg suburb are the burglar alarms, communing so incessantly in their “electronic harpies’ discourse” that no one pays any heed, so thieves and housebreakers can proceed unhindered. The man and his wife encircle their property in a coil of serrated blades · “pure concentration camp style, no frills, evident efficacy.” But the only intruder whom they maim is their son: playacting the valiant prince who revives Sleeping Beauty, he gets sliced to bits in a thicket of metal thorns.

Gordimer’s stories reveal a special talent for charting those subliminal realms where racial and sexual fears make their rendezvous. “The Life of the Imagination” (1972), which draws on her mother’s fantasy romance with a small town general practitioner, is the most acute of these tales. An artistic woman, diminished by the maternal rounds of a stunted marriage, is suddenly revived through an affair with her child’s doctor. Her preoccupation with the rituals of concealment culminates in a scene in which her lover tiptoes past the children’s room to reach her marital bed. Yet on departing, the doctor leaves the door ajar; the night wind blows in, bearing other, deeper fears. In her condition of guilty abandonment, the romance that had offered escape from the tedium of provincial life fades, leaving the woman vulnerable to the clichéd dread of black intrusion. Her sexual anxieties become racialized and her racial terror sexualized:

She was empty, unable to summon anything but this stale fantasy, shared with the whole town, the whole white population. She lay there possessed by it, and she thought, she violently longed—they will come straight into the room and stick a knife in me. No time to cry out. Quick. Deep. Over. (Selected Stories, p. 368)

**BURGER’S DAUGHTER AND CENSORSHIP**
If racial and sexual fears have always pulsed strongly through Gordimer’s fiction, she gained an unusually public sense of their connection in battling the Calvinist censors who banned *Burger's Daughter.* Her most famous and most radical work, this is a book of towering intellectual ambition wherein Gordimer simultaneously engages the insights of Freud and Marx, returning, with enhanced sophistication, to that site of tension where familial revolt crosses social insurrection.

Within her oeuvre, *Burger's Daughter* is also unprecedented in its historical scope. The action ranges from the fifties, when both the African National Conference (ANC) and the South African Communist party were prominent, through the bleak, heavily repressive sixties, the ascent of black consciousness in the seventies, to the 1976 Soweto Uprising and beyond, ultimately foreshadowing the revival, in the eighties, of nonracialism as political philosophy and anti-apartheid strategy. Gordimer conceived of *Burger's Daughter* as, in part, a way of paying homage to the generation of white activists whom she knew and admired in the fifties and early sixties. As such, the titular Burger, a person of great human warmth · idealistic yet altruistic · offsets *The Late Bourgeois World’s* Max Van Den Sandt, a rash, narcissistic radical who falls catastrophically in love with the image of himself manning the revolutionary vanguard.

For her portrait of Lionel Burger, Gordimer drew heavily on the example of the South African communist Bram Fischer, who shares with writer Breyten Breytenbach and clergyman Beyers Naude the distinction of being the most famous of Afrikaner renegades. In 1966, the year that saw the publication of *The Late Bourgeois World,* Gordimer had published an essay entitled, “*Why Did Bram Fischer Choose to Go to Jail?*” sketching his defection from a racist upbringing, his leadership in the legal defense of Nelson Mandela and the other Rivonia defendants, his disappearance underground, and his capture, destined for the jail where he was to die.

Thirteen years elapsed before Gordimer gave fictional body to selected aspects of this outline. Yet, as the title intimates, *Burger's Daughter* commemorates Fischer/Burger without centering on his example. There are several reasons that explain why, by the late seventies, Gordimer had become more exercised by the predicament of his fictional daughter. Political icons (like Fischer, or Nelson Mandela, or Steve Biko, or Mahatma Gandhi) are resistant to novelistic transformation; saintliness is an inert, psychologically shallow condition and narrative art cannot flourish by expressing static reverence for cultural heroes. (One is reminded of *Paradise Lost* and the notorious tedium of Milton’s God.) Through Rosa, who barely knows her father, Gordimer produces an admiring but external portrait; indeed, Rosa’s distance from Burger becomes part of her case, as a daughter, against him, and sets the stage for the child’s revolt. Thus Gordimer’s novel economically probes the psychology underlying the perennial forms of familial conflict and explores the wracking choice, distinctively acute under apartheid, between personal and public responsibility. The Burgers, after all, resemble a political institution: the father “knew that his schoolgirl daughter could be counted on in this family totally united in and dedicated to the struggle” (p. 12).

Gordimer’s respect for people who can be “counted on” does not, however, blind her to what gets discounted. The family’s focus on the mother’s detention exacerbates the repressed privacy of fourteen-year-old Rosa’s “monthly crisis of destruction, the purging, tearing, draining of my own structure” (p: 16). When a society is erupting into conflict, the eruption of the body into puberty goes unnoticed; political bloodletting renders menstrual bleeding invisible. Like Chris Menges’ 1988 film, *A World Apart* (which bears the influence of *Burger's Daughter*), Gordimer’s novel charts a difficult course in exploring the ways public answerability may inevitably foster private
neglects. This is made most explicit through Rosa’s simulated engagement to the young Communist prisoner Noel De Witt, as a way of guaranteeing him visits from the outside world. Yet no one observes Rosa’s private pain when she, the proxy fiancée, falls in love with Noel; her love affair is a political construction accidentally “contaminated” by private romantic feelings. Rosa’s official engagement is to the struggle · a more honorable version of “married to the mob.” Without detracting from Burger’s political fortitude, Gordimer exposes as always inadequate the attempt to yoke inner desires wholly to public causes. As such, the novel articulates Gordimer’s fixation with what she has called “the psychology of history” and maps the crosscurrents, permeating all corners of society, between political and sexual repression.

_Burger’s Daughter_ stands as Gordimer’s response to a painful challenge to her political relevance and imaginative authority in South Africa. The ascent of black consciousness in the seventies and the decline of ANC-style nonracialism caused many anti-apartheid whites, of both liberal and radical persuasion, to feel remaindered by history. “Black Man you are on you own,” Biko cautioned, and his words resonated through the structures of political and cultural organizations that refused white participation. This challenge was so urgent that it required, in answer, something tougher than a nostalgic return in memory to the nonracialism of the fifties. The altered conditions for activism and for writing ensured that Fischer could offer a symbolic starting point but no longer a practical inspiration.

South Africa’s recent history is routinely referred to as pre- or post-1976. The dividing event, the uprising led by Soweto schoolchildren, occurs only toward the end of _Burger’s Daughter_, but the novel takes its bearings from that momentous action, which, to a significant extent, was infused by black consciousness. In a stroke of intuitive brilliance, Gordimer seized upon the common appellation for 1976—“the revolt of the children”—and recognized its layered possibilities for a novel that explores generational conflict in psychological and political terms.

Gordimer’s response to this explosive historical moment entailed, above all, that she reconceive the formal possibilities of the novel. As Stephen Clingman has observed, the design of _Burger’s Daughter_ is profoundly dialectical. In the first phase, Rosa’s identity is fused to her father’s revolutionary legacy; in the book’s second, antithetical movement, Rosa withdraws from the family and its stifling political expectations, ventures overseas, and affirms an autonomous identity. While in Europe, Rosa grows intimate with Fischer’s sexually liberated first wife, Katya, who helps demystify the father and sanction Rosa’s romantic and sexual defection from familial responsibility. Finally, after a devastating exchange with Zwelinzima, the adopted “half-brother” of her childhood but now a black consciousness exile in London, Rosa reassesses her position and returns to South Africa to forge her own form of political commitment, which ultimately delivers her, like Lionel, into jail. The novel’s closing synthesis reconnects Rosa with the family’s ideological heritage, but Gordimer is emphatic that, given Rosa’s personal maturation and the intervention of black consciousness, her activism does not simply recapitulate her father’s politics. The needs, the possibilities have changed.

The novel thus poses the paradox of the antiauthoritarian father who, from the daughter’s perspective, remains a representative of authority. The second, European movement of the narrative, stages the child’s counterrevolution. The psychological necessity for this is familiar, but, in a South African context, there are sound political reasons, too. Rosa’s rejection of her legacy is cathartic because it replaces the static organizing principle of inheritance · with all its baggage of
birthrights, “natural” allegiances, and “natural” successions · on which white supremacy is founded, with an active principle of individual choice. In Rosa’s words: “I was struggling with a monstrous resentment against the claim... of blood, shared genes, the semen from which I had issued and the body in which I had grown” (p. 62). Once this revolt has succeeded, it remains, in the final episodes, for that individual to recover her sense of social purpose.

_Burger’s Daughter_ positions itself at exactly that intersection where the personal and the political cross. Thus Rosa’s remark concerning her father · “I wanted to know how to defect from him” (p. 284) · resonates in both realms, while a reference to the public “trial of her parents” (p. 89) takes on Freudian undertones. Nowhere is this crossover more explicit than in Gordimer’s sustained effort to ring the changes on the concept of freedom. (In contemporary literature, _Burger’s Daughter_ shares this obsession with V. S. Naipaul’s _In a Free State_, although the two books arise from quite different political affiliations.) For Lionel Burger, freedom is an awaited collective condition, not a present or individual possibility. At the other extreme stands Rosa’s vaguely liberal lover, Conrad, for whom freedom exists within “the closed circuit of the self” (p. 86). In France, the apogee of Rosa’s familial revolt occurs when she languishes in a condition of anonymity liberated from responsibility: “Bernard Chabalier’s mistress isn’t Lionel Burger’s daughter; she’s certainly not accountable to the Future...” (p. 304). Yet, having been seduced by the notion of freedom as a life of maximum individual choice unburdened by commitment, she discovers that such a conception of personal liberty is not absolute but ideological. The chief catalyst for this altered attitude is Zwelinzima Vulindlela, the man she once knew as her adopted black brother. On a parallel track to Rosa, Zwelinzima has had to free himself from the long shadow of white paternalism, symbolized by the mock-respectful name given to him in childhood · Baasie, “little boss.” In his irate, sardonic attack on white meddling in the liberation struggle, Zwelinzima reintroduces into the novel a notion of freedom as entangled in obligation. Resenting the manner in which his dead father has vanished from public memory while Lionel Burger is lionized, Zwelinzima declares: “Whatever you whites touch, it’s a take-over.... Even when we get free they’ll want us to remember to thank Lionel Burger” (p. 321). It is after her hostile exchange with Zwelinzima that Rosa decides to return to South Africa and pursue a vision of freedom that entails commitment. The novel’s closing conception of freedom is of a bond between an individual and an unavoidable course of action · a form of deeply felt necessity, the opposite of whimsy. As such, the novel reaffirms, by analogy, Gordimer’s own formulation of the writer’s freedom, which I alluded to at the outset of this essay. For Gordimer, as for Rosa, the challenge is to tack a course between unthinking, stifling orthodoxy and the false freedom of atomistic autonomy.

The analogy between the predicaments of Gordimer and her protagonist can be pressed further by returning to that visceral scene in which Zwelinzima confronts Rosa:

> Everyone in the world must be told what a great hero he [Burger] was and how much he suffered for the blacks. Everyone must cry over him and show his life on television and write in the papers. Listen, there are dozens of our fathers sick and dying like dogs, kicked out of the locations when they can’t work any more. Getting old and dying in prison. Killed in prison. It’s nothing. I know plenty blacks like Burger. It’s nothing, it’s us, we must be used to it, it’s not going to show on English television. He would have been the first to say what you’re saying. He didn’t think there was anything special about a white being a political prisoner. (p. 320)
Although Rosa defends her father and proceeds to find her niche of relevance, Zwelinzima’s accusation remains so powerful that it can be read as anticipating the very terms of Burger’s Daughter’s rejection. Faced with the charge of white irrelevance, a less audacious writer than Gordimer might have slumped into silence; instead, she staged, out of a preemptive rather than a defensive impulse, precisely the kind of reception that her novel could anticipate from black consciousness quarters.

Burger’s Daughter exposed, with unprecedented clarity, the crucible of pressures from which Gordimer’s writing has emerged. If, in the Zwelinzima scene, the novel confronts the possibility of its own dismissal, the book’s last words prophesy a very different kind of rejection. A French friend is reading a letter from the now jailed Rosa:

There was a reference to a watermark of light that came into the cell at sundown every evening, reflected from some west-facing surface outside; something Lionel Burger once mentioned. But the line had been deleted by the prison censor. Madame Bagnelli was never able to make it out. (p. 361)

Three weeks after publication, crates bearing copies of Burger’s Daughter to South Africa were embargoed and the novel was banned. Some months later, the Publications Control Board lifted the banning order, but only after a huge international furor. Earlier novels by Gordimer had suffered similarly: A World of Strangers, which the authorities deemed to “undermine the traditional race policy of the Republic,” was unobtainable in South Africa for twelve years, The Late Bourgeois World for ten. But no previous action by the South African censors had set off anything like the outcry provoked by their treatment of Burger’s Daughter.

One fascinating spin-off of the affair was Gordimer’s What Happened to Burger’s Daughter: or How South African Censorship Works (1980). It is mandatory reading for anyone who would understand the strained conditions under which literature has been produced in South Africa, at least between 1963 and 1980. Gordimer’s documentation of the case summons an array of contradictory opinions. One committee member advised that “banning this novel will make it sought out surreptitiously in this country. Censorship can be counterproductive, making this novel a threat when it might, in fact, not be a threat.” Another, who urged the banning, found the novel biased but brilliantly researched ‘a fact which makes its one-sidedness even more dangerous. An influential judge railed: “Don’t buy it · it is not worth buying. Very badly written.... This is also why we eventually passed it. We knew our people wouldn’t read it anyway. You know us boere find it a bit irritating when someone practices politics so badly.”

For a more precise sense of what Gordimer was up against one can turn to her earlier essay, “Censored, Banned, Gagged,” which cites the notorious Publications and Entertainments Act of 1963:

A publication is deemed “undesirable” if it, or any part of it, is indecent or obscene or is offensive or harmful to public morals; is blasphemous or offensive to the religious convictions or feelings of any section of the inhabitants of the Republic; brings any section of the inhabitants into ridicule or contempt; is harmful to the relations between any sections of the inhabitants; is prejudicial to the safety of the State, the general welfare, or the peace and good order.
The definition of what may be considered indecent, obscene, offensive, or harmful to public morals includes the portrayal of murder, suicide, death, horror, cruelty, fighting, brawling, ill-treatment, lawlessness, gangsterism, robbery, crime, the technique of crimes and criminals, tippling, drunkenness, trafficking in or addiction to drugs, smuggling, sexual intercourse, prostitution, promiscuity, white-slaving, licentiousness, lust, passionate love scenes, sexual assault, rape, sodomy, masochism, sadism, sexual bestiality, abortion, change of sex, night life, physical poses, nudity, scant or inadequate dress, divorce, marital infidelity, adultery, illegitimacy, human or social deviation or degeneracy, or any other similar or related phenomenon. (The Essential Gesture, p. 61)

The detection of any of the above provided sufficient grounds for a work to be quashed.

Gordimer has gathered renown not only from her fiction but from her standing as one of the century’s most resolute adversaries of censorship. She has penned dozens of essays and delivered scores of addresses on the issue as it affects South African authors and writers worldwide. With typically broad vision she used the attention that the banning of Burger’s Daughter provoked to campaign for the creative liberty of those South African writers, predominantly black, who do not share her international visibility. Her stand finds its most outstanding articulation in the 1980 essay, “Censors and Unconfessed History,” republished in The Essential Gesture.

THE LATER WORK

Compared to the iron-fisted repression and almost unchallenged state dominance of the 1960’s, the 1970’s proved to be a decade of resurgent resistance in South Africa. Black South Africans drew heart from the mid-decade fall of Portuguese colonialism in neighboring Mozambique and Angola while the black consciousness movement, trade unions, and student organizations spearheaded repeated challenges to apartheid rule. As a consequence of the momentous 1976 uprising, South Africans had become, by the end of the decade, obsessed with imminent time. Black South Africans, gauging history to be on their side, sensed (in Aime Cesaire’s phrase) “the rendezvous of victory.” Many white South Africans also conceded, for the first time, the probable collapse of white rule and began to hear the death knell of what they fondly called “the South African way of life.”

One has only to scan the literature, black and white alike, to gauge how the nation’s writers sought to command the future through metaphors of dawn, birth, revolutionary redemption, apocalypse, and historical closure. The Late Bourgeois World, an early instance of this tendency, was succeeded by Alex La Guma’s In the Fog of the Season’s End, Coetzee’s Dusklands and Waiting for the Barbarians, Pieter-Dirk Uys’s Paradise is Closing Down, Karel Schoeman’s Promised Land, Mongane Wally Serote’s To Every Birth Its Blood, and Gordimer’s own “Some Monday for Sure.” July’s People (1981) falls squarely within this tendency. Like many of the above works, Gordimer’s novel gives body to a postapartheid future that seemed at the time inexorable yet vague, imminent yet slow in coming forth. Nothing conveys this historical mood more precisely than the epigraph to July’s People, drawn from Antonio Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks: “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.”
As Stephen Clingman has recognized, *July's People* is less preoccupied with detailed envisaging of what is to come than with “seeing the present through the eyes of the future” (p. 202). In other words, the novel enacts the desire to escape the unendurable, sickly suspense of the present by consigning it to the detritus of the historical past. Gordimer stages this desire by chronicling the twinned fates of two families, one white, one black, in the wake of a guerrilla takeover of Johannesburg. Neither party is overtly political but the novel discloses the extent to which, at the deepest level, their relationship has been contoured by economic forces. The man whom Bam and Maureen Smales know only as July has been their faithful manservant for many years. Under the migrant labor system, he divides his life between the townships and a remote Bantustan where his family resides, but which he manages to visit only once every two years. July belongs to an older generation, remote from the spirit of youthful insurrection that swept the nation in the seventies, and still defers to authority, whether that of his white employers or his rural chief. July is not an intimation of the future; he is stationed very much in the interregnum.

Bam and Maureen belong to that class of suburban professionals who dislike apartheid but steer clear of politics. They believe in civilized reform, see themselves as enlightened, and join contact groups to meet blacks; Bam, an architect, presents conference papers with titles like “Needs and Means in African Rural Architecture.” Yet they do not know July’s name (Mwawate), are ignorant of his family and of the conditions of his split life, and lack even rudimentary familiarity with his language. The relationship is founded on a species of self-deluding liberalism that generates opacity.

When Johannesburg erupts into violence, Bam and Maureen, their children, and July bundle into the family’s light truck and make the three-day journey to the Bantustan where they take shelter in July’s hut. That voyage is the first of the novel’s series of elaborate reversals: it becomes a retributive reenactment of forced removal, the government policy that drives all unwanted blacks—“superfluous appendages” in official parlance—into Bantustan dumping grounds. And so the Smaleses are initiated into black experience by being deprived of their freedom of movement. Hemmed in, uncertain when or if the waiting will end, they receive a mandatory education in the sensation of statelessness. Through such layered reversals, Gordimer stages an inquiry into the psychology and economics of dependency, one that probes the Janus-faced character of power in master-servant relations and is inevitably shadowed by Hegel. July has been reliant on the Smaleses not just for his job but, more important, for keeping his “pass” in order. But in the Bantustan, his paternalistic employers are transformed into his wards. July assumes quiet control over the simple insignia of power, notably the car keys. But it is left to Daniel, July’s son and the implicit agent of the future, to abscond with the “master’s” gun on his way to join the guerrillas.

Over the course of the novel, the Bantustan emerges as the underbelly of suburbia. Previously, Bam and Maureen had enjoyed excursions into the wilderness; now their relationship to it becomes profoundly untouristic. The middle class category of leisure dissolves and scenery turns to unsubmissive bush as they are schooled in the rough arts of necessity. Likewise, they learn the contingency of desire on the privacy of the master bedroom. Yet Gordimer is emphatic that the white man and woman experience what Maureen calls the “explosion of roles” (p. 117) differently. In the past, Bam’s control of technology and his role as provider braced his social authority; robbed of these, he suffers complete mortification. Maureen, on the other hand, turns increasingly to July for her needs and discovers, in the process, that their former “working relationship” was a charade incapable of leaving even a residue of rapport.
The revealed sterility of the Smaleses’ lives recalls Mehring’s condition in *The Conservationist*. Symptomatically, both novels are left open-ended, with Mehring vulnerable to the approach of a man of uncertain purpose, while Maureen Smales abandons her family and rushes headlong toward an unmarked helicopter containing “saviours or murderers” (p. 158). Maureen’s fate, however, seems the less foreclosed of the two: although nakedly unprepared for a postapartheid future, her flight may turn out to be suicidal or liberatory.

These, Gordimer’s two most rural novels, also share limitations. In each, rather than inhabiting the same plane as white characters, black figures are invested with symbolic portent. Somewhat like the Africans in *Heart of Darkness*, if less absolutely, July exists primarily as a foil for an inquiry into the character of white civilization once the fabric of civic life has been rent. In the final instance, *July’s People* seems an intelligent experiment, yet somewhat inert, and the tension between Maureen and July never rises to the compelling level that animates, for instance, the showdown between Ross and Zwelinzima.

The eighties saw Gordimer commit herself to writing past the uncertainties of the contemporary deadlock. As in *July’s People*, this impulse also informs stories like “A Soldier’s Embrace” and “At the Rendezvous of Victory,” both set in the aftermath of a popular guerrilla triumph, and the closing pages of *A Sport of Nature* (1987), which usher in the postapartheid era. Much of this work, however, seems bloodless. Moreover, even though no fiction of Gordimer’s is without strong writing, when advancing the future her prose often becomes symptomatically labored, as in this passage from *July’s People*:

> It began prosaically weirdly. The strikes of 1960 had dragged on, one inspired or brought about by solidarity with another until the walkout and the shut-down were lived with as contiguous and continuous phenomena rather than industrial chaos. While the government continued to compose concessions to the black trade unions exquisitely worded to conceal exactly concomitant restrictions, the black workers concerned went hungry, angry, and workless. (pp. 6-7)

*A Sport of Nature*, too, moves into the future, if only in the final chapter. However, the entire novel can be read as an attempt to reconceive South Africa and the nuclear family. Its historical sweep, international setting, and return to themes of political and familial reconstruction mark the novel as a sequel to *Burger’s Daughter*. The book’s epigraph, taken from the Oxford English Dictionary, defines a sport of nature as “a plant, animal, etc., which exhibits abnormal variation or a departure from the parent stock or type... a spontaneous mutation; a new variety produced in this way.” Hillela, the novel’s strong-minded, adventurous heroine, incarnates this concept. From childhood on, she refines her gift for errant brilliance, taking shape as a healthy deviant from the norms of a society perverted by racial bigotry and from the norms of that other aberration, the nuclear family.

The progeny of her mother’s adultery, Hillela is sent down from Rhodesia for consorting with a “coloured” youth; she then departs her adopted home in Johannesburg after being caught in a sexual liaison with her cousin, Sasha. Hillela’s flouting of conventions culminates in her marriage to an ANC guerrilla. After his assassination, she travels the world as a political refugee and a single mother carrying an interracial child – the icon of a post-apartheid South Africa. She subsequently marries an exiled African leader who regains his seat of power, establishes a successful state, and
rises to the head of the Organization of African Unity. In the final scene, the now illustrious couple return to Cape Town for the installation of South Africa’s first black-led government.

Gordimer once remarked that “whites of former South Africa will have to redefine themselves in a new collective life within new structures” (*Essential Gesture*, p. 264). If “former South Africa” conveys the author’s impatience to get beyond the dragging interregnum, Hillela is the fictional embodiment of that sentiment. The ultimate iconoclast and breacher of taboos, Hillela’s greatest delight is in not having reproduced herself  as a South African and as a woman. She emerges as a politically engaged pied piper, a fairy-tale activist leading the way to unimagined freedoms.

Sasha’s reflection on the utopian impulse perhaps comes closest to capturing the convictions that motivate the novel:

> Utopia is unattainable; without aiming for it—taking a chance!—you can never hope even to fall far short of it. ... Without utopia—the idea of utopia—there’s a failure of the imagination—and that’s a failure to know how to go on living. It will take another kind of being to stay on, here. A new white person. Not us. The chance is a wild chance—like falling in love. (p. 187)

*A Sport of Nature* reveals Gordimer’s romance with the idea of such a being, but unfortunately, a rift develops between conception and execution. After the strongly imagined first hundred pages, the prose becomes diffuse and rarefied. The political panoramas are too general, while Hillela, for all her sensuality, remains only partially realized. An instinctively phantasmagoric writer might have pulled this project off, but Gordimer’s talent is grounded in the intimate observations of realistic prose and can seem cumbersome in flight. Nor are matters helped by her choice of a distant, disengaged perspective replete with remarks such as, “When she who people say was once Hillela thinks of that time ... and no-one who knew her then knows whether she ever does that is all she retains of it” (p. 17). Unlike Rosa, Hillela is never known from the inside and is too slightly conceived to support this burden of vagueness. Moreover, while Gordimer’s choice of an erratic, inconsistent perspective dramatizes the immense labor of founding a new kind of individual, that same perspective revives and exacerbates her old difficulties with narrative cohesion, resulting in writing that, for all its bursts of brilliance, is ultimately scattered.

After the disappointment of *A Sport of Nature*, Gordimer reaffirmed her formidable talent with *My Son’s Story*, her most impassioned novel yet and her most compelling since *Burger’s Daughter*. The book’s brilliance stems largely from Gordimer’s recognition of deceit as the subject for someone as fascinated by stirrings in the loin as she is by the stirrings of history. Sexual deceits are clandestine, they flee the light, head underground. In South Africa, they share this condition with outlawed political activity which finds people tunneling out double lives, mixing the exhilaration of illicit solidarity with the relentless dread of exposure. On the fulcrum of the lie—which may tilt lives toward selfish narcissism or selfless idealism—Gordimer balances her profound inquiry into the character of sexual, emotional, and political commitments; what it means, in short, to be counted on.

In the resistance movement, the protagonist, Sonny, counts. A mixed race (so-called “coloured”) schoolteacher, he at first hovers on the political fringe, drawing his principal pleasures from Gramsci, Shakespeare, and Kafka, from the passion of his teaching, and from family life. But
after losing his job for heading a student march and getting detained for two years, he throws himself zealously into the mass movement for democracy, where he gathers renown as a rousing orator and a savvy underground strategist.

Sonny adjusts himself to a permanent double life stretched between his family, who are indifferent to politics, and the cause of liberation. An upright man, Sonny nonetheless lives a devious life, for under the surveillance of a police state, an unbending commitment to honesty would be reckless, even, dare one say, unprincipled. Thus Sonny shows loyalty to his comrades by safeguarding their confidences, and loyalty to his family by withholding information that would endanger them under torture or arrest.

And then, in those vast fields of protective silence, sexual deceit begins to mushroom. The habitual, unexplained absences continue as before, but get devoted as often to clandestine love-making as to clandestine politics. That split, however, misleads: Sonny increasingly treats his liaisons with Hannah, a white activist who campaigns for detainees’ rights, as a natural extension of his life of risk. Hannah is everything his demure, homebody wife is not: now finally “the cause was the lover, the lover the cause” (223). Gordimer displays impeccable instincts for the aphrodisiac aura that clings to political courage.

Sonny and Hannah pursue razor-edge lives that require them to cheat constantly on the state. From there it is but a simple step to becoming bonded through the confidential thrill of more selfish deceits:

They were so successful that now and then somebody would introduce them: I don’t think you’ve met ... this is ... Sonny and Hannah: presented each to the other, as strangers, by a third person. (p. 70)

And so a talent for privacy gives way to the first unnecessary lie, then to dishonesty as ever-present substance abuse.

Yet in truth this intimate duo comes closer to a ménage à trois: Big Brother is always party to their liaisons. As a “known” subversive, Sonny will be watched by the wide, sleepless eye of the state until either he or apartheid is entombed. A further decisive observer scans Sonny’s infidelities: Will, his fifteen-year-old son who, skipping school, stumbles on his father’s deceit in a cinema foyer. The truant son faces the truant father and his blond lover who from then on becomes a ghostly, unnamed presence at the center of their family life.

When Gordimer adopts a wholly external perspective · as in July’s People and A Sport of Nature · that distance lapses all too often into detached indifference. Wisely, in My Son’s Story she revives the tactic that proved so persuasive in Burger’s Daughter, switching between an outside view of an esteemed revolutionary and the inner swirlings of his angry, skeptical adolescent offspring. Will, wrenched out of innocence, struggles to cope with his unsolicited complicity in the deception of his mother. To add to the trauma, he intuits the affair as his father’s last-ditch effort to assert his superior virility: “He’s not moving aside, off women’s bodies, for me” (94). What could be more Oedipal than an aging father, who clings to the name Sonny, staging his infidelities before a son named Will?
Gordimer’s novel is soaked in the political tensions of the day. Police firing on mourners grouped around a grave; machinations within the union; guileful communications between prisoners and the world outside; brittle, old-school socialists who refuse, even in the wake of changes in Eastern Europe, to update their forms of radicalism. A lesser writer might have contented herself with these broad public themes around brutality and resistance, but Gordimer insists on giving equal attention to the segregations, surveillance, faction fighting, buried malice, courage, opportunism, and diplomatic lies which mark that other, oh-so-civil war waged between the walls of home.

A decade back in Gordimer’s fiction, Burger’s daughter revolted against her family’s assumption that she too would be nothing more than politically correct. She invoked her father’s enemies to aid her flight into exile. Will’s adolescent uprising finds an even more violent expression. In defiance, his parents had bought a house in a conservative, working class Afrikaans suburb; they were the only “coloures” on the block. One night, during their absence at a political gathering, neo-Nazis scorch the family home. Will, looking on at the charred relics of the site of his humiliation, his father’s infidelities, his sister’s attempted suicide, persistent police irruptions, and the arrest of both parents, exhorts the flames to complete the purgation: Let it burn.

Gordimer has portrayed herself as an androgynous writer and often chooses male perspectives in order to fathom women as men view them. This tactic comes off brilliantly in My Son’s Story: by entrusting her narrative to Sonny and Will, she is able to stage the full force with which, in “seeing” Aila, they render her invisible:

[People] mistook her gentleness for disdain; perhaps he mistook it, too, in another way, taking the gentleness for what it appeared to be instead of the strength of will it softly gloved. (p. 7)

In running between women, Sonny loses his instincts for Aila’s ways, and errs in treating her as known. Will, but not his father, intuits that Aila has long possessed a silent knowledge of her husband’s betrayals. Under cover of silence and neglect, she can plot another life. So when Sonny awakens to her knowledge, the time for confessions and scenes has passed, for she has moved far, far off, beyond retrieval. Her behavior disarms him utterly:

Sonny forgave himself; but this was futile. Aila had never reproached him, so there was nothing for her to forgive. ... Even the harm he had done her was no claim on her; he saw that. (p. 258)

In a quite unpredictable turnaround, Aila proceeds to surpass Sonny not just in familial respect but also in political prestige.

Remarkably, Gordimer manages this elaborate inversion without belittling Sonny’s political integrity or caricaturing Hannah. The novel never underestimates that unspeakable pain which strikes when fiery desire for one person and the rich trust of another confront each other as totally incompatible states of grace. Gordimer writes as if she knows, and sympathizes with both.

With My Son’s Story Gordimer has found—as she did in Burger’s Daughter—a plot and a prose equal to the weight of her ideas. Importantly, her success coincides with her abandonment of futuristic writing; the world to come jars with her earthy, nineteenth-century realist sensibility. She is
also wise to return to the urban roots of her experience—rural Africans will never appear as more than symbolic figments in her writing, whereas she has befriended and socialized with mixed race, middleclass intellectuals like Sonny for thirty or forty years.

Among the many surprises sprung by this book, nothing surpasses Gordimer’s outrageous choice of perspective. Surely no precedent exists for a passionately feminist novel, composed by a white woman, in which the leading character is a black man and the most intimate voice that of his teenaged son. And this, moreover, from a writer inhabiting the world’s most segregated society. But, from childhood onward, Gordimer has been possessed by a transgressive spirit. Read from one angle, My Son’s Story illicitly appropriates so-called “coloured” experience; from another, it expresses a utopian defiance, Gordimer’s determination to exceed the bounds of her partition-ridden society, charting lives that are meant to be barred from her experiential and imaginative maps. Does this novel, then, document her racial arrogance or her refusal to perpetuate an apartheid of the mind?

In 1956 Gordimer published a story entitled “Which New Era Would Be?” A brash young Jennifer flounces into the ghetto from the suburbs, brimming with concern for the plight of the oppressed. When she has breezed back out again, Jake Alexander, a burly “coloured,” muses scathingly:

These women felt as you did. They were sure of it. ... There was no escaping their understanding. They even insisted on feeling the resentment you must feel at their identifying themselves with your feelings. (Selected Stories, p. 83)

Thirty-four years later, a version of that outrage recurs when Will first sights Hannah Plowman and dismisses her as “a blonde women with the naked face and apologetic, presumptuous familiarity, in her smile, of people who come to help” (p. 14). “Presumptuous familiarity”: in a phrase, Will, no less than Jake, hurls an accusation at his author. In Burger’s Daughter, in her finest stories, and most recently, in My Son’s Story, Gordimer quite consciously gives her skeptics just enough rope to hang her on. Some might read that as a sign of her honesty. After a novel that inquires so mercilessly into the subtle maneuverings between probity and deceit, one would prefer to call it something else, something more extraordinary: a mark of her irrepressible daring.

**CONCLUSION**

As A Sport of Nature testifies, Gordimer has come, over time, increasingly to situate herself as an African writer. If her great fictional preoccupations are the human consequences of apartheid and the possibility of their transcendence, she has nevertheless honed a complementary talent for evoking her physical environs. Her political concerns would remain abstract were they not embedded in minutely observed African landscapes: “Pelicans on the water turn the lake into a child’s bathtub filled with plastic toys. The flamingoes will not stir until late afternoon, when the colour under their wings as they rise seems to leak into the water like blood from a cut finger” (“Pula,” in Essential Gesture, p. 207). So, too, with this impression of the ostentatious night scream of the tree hyrax: “Among the barks, grunts and cries there was one Greek and immortal in its desperate passion, gathering up echoes from all the private wailing walls of the human soul” (“The Congo River,” in Essential Gesture, p. 168).
Yet, to Gordimer, such evocations of nature must seem comparatively painless alongside the
dilemmas that wrack all South African authors who seek to imagine their fractured nation whole.
She is only one of a succession of writers, black and white, to reflect on this torment when she
observes: “In a society as deeply and calculatedly compartmentalised as South Africa... the writer’s
potential has unscalable limitations” ("The Novel and the Nation," p. 52). The outstanding integrity
of her work derives in no small part from her commitment to respect and flex those limits
simultaneously, acknowledging bounds to her authority while refusing to view them as an excuse for
imaginative timidity.

Although the men she knows as “the mad scientists” of apartheid have entertained dreams
of absolute separation, Gordimer has always managed to get beyond merely reactive, Manichean
writing that would remain an inverted symptom of apartheid. Her fiction is not peopled with
murderous whites or saccharine blacks; she prefers to station herself in the troubled zone of
attempted reconciliation, where she scours pretensions for signs of resilient hope. Scanning four
decades of work, one is struck by how often Gordimer’s most distinguished writing occurs at those
awkward junctures where black and white strive, in a manner half-genuine, half-skeptical, to confirm
contact. Her insights can be ruthless. One recalls, for instance, Steven Sithole’s remark in A World of
Strangers, that a jazz-opera, imagined collaboratively by a Sophiatown musician and a suburban
counterpart, is more of a white man’s idea of what a black man would write, and a black man’s idea
of what a white man would expect him to write, than the fusion of a black man’s and a white man’s
world of imagination” (p. 201). Likewise, in this scenario from Burger’s Daughter, Rosa pinpoints the
cross-purposes of black and white women staging a tea-group for the furtherance of mutual
understanding:

I skirted Flora’s assembly and sat down at the back. ... Everyone · I began to see
them properly · bunched together in the middle and back seats, the black women out of old
habit of finding themselves allotted secondary status and the white ones out of anxiety not
to assume first place. ... Dressed in their best, one after another, black women in wigs and
two-piece dresses pleaded, were complaining, opportuning for the creches, orphans, blind,
crippled or aged of their “place.” They asked for “old” cots, “old” school primers, “old”
toys and furniture, “old” braille typewriters, “old” building material. They had come through
the front door but the logic was still of the back door. They didn’t believe they’d get
anything but what was cast-off; they didn’t, any of them, believe there was anything else to
be had from white women, it was all they were good for. (pp. 202-203)

Without the alchemy of hope, such knowing exposés, however brilliant, could easily calcify
into cynicism. But Gordimer is not content to rest in the knowledge that she opposes apartheid, for,
as she puts it, that would be to “remain negatively within the white order” (Essential Gesture, p. 278).
She has advanced well beyond routine negativity: unlike much white South African writing from
Alan Paton to Christopher Hope, her prose does not clank with the self-imposed manacles of racial
guilt, an aesthetically repetitive and politically obstructive emotion.

In 1991, Gordimer became the first South African and the first woman in twenty-five years
to receive the Nobel Prize for literature. The timing could not have been more apt: she is the only
South African writer publishing regularly whose literary career spans the entire history of official
apartheid. Her first book, Face to Face, appeared in 1949, just months after the National Party seized
power, and by the time she received the Nobel tribute, apartheid was spinning to its demise.
While writers commonly grow less rebellious with age and fame, Gordimer has kept her faculty of revolt very much alive. Over four violent, tumultuous decades, she has emerged as the poet laureate of apartheid’s morbid symptoms. She has emerged, too, as a great rarity, a contemporary writer whose vision is informed by a restless idealism. Whether lacerating white presumptions or reaching after alternatives to South Africa’s blighted present, Gordimer’s writing expresses her determination not just to document her society, but to hasten its transformation.

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**IV. INTERVIEWS**


V. CRITICAL STUDIES


