

Review

Activism and Narrative Techniques in Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*

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The great women novelist in Commonwealth period who is Nadine Gordimer, her novel *The Conservationist* was a joint winner of the Booker prize in 1974. As a critic remark in the Observer (quoted on the back flap of the text), "The author of this gravel beautiful book has transcended her considerable talent and produced one of those rare works of imaginative literature that command the special respect reserved for artistic daring and fulfilled ambition. Gordimer has earned herself a place among the few novelists who really matter. *The Conservationist* reads as if it had to be written." The narrative strategy of the novel is complex, and involves an equivocal treatment of the prediction of political change, the nature of a benighted white consciousness and the idea of conservative. The central protagonist of the novel, Mehring's, the white 'colonizer', is not the narrator. The novelist introduced different kind of Narrative technique and activist thoughts. that is why the novel is called Activist novel in the field of Literature or work of art with the literariness of Nadine Gordimer's

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INTRODUCTION

Nadine Gordimer (20 November 1923 – 13 July 2014) was a South African writer, political activist and recipient of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature. She was recognized as a woman "who through her magnificent epic writing has – in the words of Alfred Nobel – has been of very great benefit to humanity". Gordimer's writing dealt with moral and racial issues, particularly apartheid in South Africa. Under that regime, works such as *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People* were banned. She was active in the anti-apartheid movement, joining the African National Congress during the days when the organization was banned. She was also active in HIV/AIDS causes.

The narrative strategy becomes especially significant in evaluating a novelist like Nadine Gordimer whose evolution as a writer of merit considerably depends on its skillful, competent use. The 'narrative technique/strategy'

may be interpreted as the way or the manner in which a novelist gives a detailed account of a number of connected events, the experiences which may be true or fictitious by using skill.

Nadine Gordimer is born 20 November 1923, who is a South African writer, political activist and recipient of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature. She was recognized as a woman "who through her magnificent epic writing has – in the words of Alfred Nobel has been of very great benefit to humanity". Gordimer's writing has long dealt with moral and racial issues, particularly apartheid in South Africa. Under that regime, works such as *July's People* were banned. She was active in the anti-apartheid movement, joining the African National Congress during the days when the organization was banned. She has recently been active in HIV/AIDS causes.

Gordimer's novel, *The Conservationist* was a joint winner of the Booker prize in 1974. As a critic remark in the *Observer* (quoted on the back flap of the text), "The author of this gravel beautiful book has transcended her considerable talent and produced one of those rare works of imaginative literature that command the special respect reserved for artistic daring and fulfilled ambition. Gordimer has earned herself a place among the few novelists who really matter. *The Conservationist* reads as if it had to be written." The narrative strategy of the novel is complex, and involves an equivocal treatment of the prediction of political change, the nature of a benighted white consciousness and the idea of conservative. The central protagonist of the novel, Mehring's, the white 'colonizer', is not the narrator.

The prediction of political change

A variety of different styles are used to suit varying needs in the novel. But a pre-eminent contrast may be that between present-tense narration of what are presented as Mehring's current actions and thoughts, and past - tense narration of past events, of the contemporary activities of others like Jacobus, the chief farmhand, and of enduring conditions and habitual activities, Gordimer's third- person narration is directed to the portrayal of back society here. The narrator privileges of the white personified in him, old, passionate and he is made to realize that Africa is not the prerogative of the white man alone.

When Mehring, a businessman who owns a "hobby" farm in South Africa, is made aware that a body has been found on his property, it forces him to examine his own life and mortality. As the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s sweeps the world, the apartheid system in "old" South Africa is starting to crumble. Mehring takes in this changing scene as he deals with the black workers on his farm, his activist girlfriend, his bitter ex-wife in the U.S. and his rebellious son. Mehring must think hard about what he really wants out of life.

Farm owner and industrialist Mehring is informed by Jacobus, his head work hand, that a body has been found by the river on his property. Mehring examines the body, noting the nice clothes. No one knows who the man is. Mehring calls the police and is annoyed that they see no urgency in sending an officer to the farm. They finally agree to visit the next day.

Mehring is from the city. The farm is his escape from the stress of everyday life. His business friends think his farm is "quaint," but to him there is a lot more to it than just the tax write-off. He talks with Jacobus about the dead man as they review farm tasks. Mehring is appalled that the police just buried the body on his property, near where it was originally found.

Mehring walks by the river after a business trip and

naps in the tall grass. He thinks of his girlfriend and his teenage son. His neighbors across the river, the De Beers, visit for a few hours. Meanwhile, Jacobus meets with some men looking for work at the spare farmhouse. They don't have proper work papers, but he reassures them it will not be an issue. Jacobus is a crafty fellow. He is the one in charge when Mehring is away. As such, he walks a fine line between serving his employer and fellow employees.

Narrative Strategy

Mehring visits the farmhouse and remembers visiting his girlfriend, Antonia. She is an activist and taunts him constantly about his corporate lifestyle. He finds her talk intriguing, even though she berates him constantly. He tells her about his son and ex-wife in the United States. Mehring wanders the 400-acre property and ends up at his favorite place, the third pasture by the river. He feels peaceful in the reeds and willows. There, he takes out a letter from his son Terry and reads it. He considers Terry spoiled and very self-indulgent. Mehring is upset and rips up the letter, although he later picks up the pieces.

The August winter is dry and cold. The wind whips through the camps near Mehring's farm and blows garbage across the roads. One cold night, some men come for Solomon at the camp and tell him that he needs to come with them to help his brother. He is reluctant but follows them out into the night anyway. The next morning, Jacobus finds Solomon naked and unconscious but still alive in the field. He takes him to the hospital and phones Mehring to tell him what happened. Mehring is concerned. Jacobus assumes that creditors beat Solomon because of his brother's money problems. Coincidentally, Solomon is found in the third field, where the dead man was buried.

A fire starts on the other side of the river, jumps across and severely burns a portion of Mehring's property. It stops far short of the cattle, but it devastates his favorite resting spot in the third pasture. Even the water reeds and willows are badly burnt. He walks in despair and realizes just how selfish Antonia is, just like his son. Still, Mehring feels bad about Terry and the fact that he hadn't been around much for his youth. He knows the scarred land will heal quickly, but he is upset nonetheless.

The "Indian" store, run by ymigris from India, is set up like a prison, not to keep them in, but to keep the locals out. They have completely fenced in the property, even the roof. Dogs prowl the perimeter. Still, Bismillah, the middle-aged son, paces the area cautiously. He can't stop their greatest fear, that the government will evict them for good. They have lawyers hired to delay the process. His son Dawood works in the shop with him and his frail father, William. There is a day when a local man gets in a dispute about money and leaves in disgust.

William, usually just a fixture on the wall, comes to life and argues excitedly with the man.

Mehring remembers a plane ride when he is forced to ride coach and sits next to a teenage girl. Her hand brushes his thigh, and he touches her in return. The girl shows no reaction. He continues touching her for hours, until the plane finally lands. Only then does the girl go screaming to her mother. Mehring is amazed at how little comes of that situation. The family doesn't have enough social status to do anything to him.

A ceremonial dance

Winter ends, and Terry comes to visit. The workers prepare for a ceremonial dance while father and son walk the property. Mehring sees some of his son's activist literature and is disgusted. Still, he is wistful that Terry might someday take over the farm. He takes Terry to the airport and retires to the farm, listening to the beat of the drums. He is truly happy on his property.

The celebration lasts well into the night. Food quickly runs out, but there is plenty of beer. Solomon asks Jacobus if he died in the field, confused over the fact that Jacobus thought he was dead. Jacobus laughs off the question as ridiculous. Solomon relates being "dead" in the field with the other dead man buried there.

The fire revitalizes the pasture down by the river. Already, it is in full bloom, with more color than Mehring has ever seen. He thinks of Antonia and how little she understands him and life in general. He walks the river and feels good. Mehring even gives a ride to some strangers on the way to work. He meets a young girl at breakfast who is a friend of Terry's. He knows her family and is shocked at lunch to find out that her father has just committed suicide over a bad business deal. This makes Mehring reconsider his legacy again. Who will continue after he is gone? He can't bear to attend the funeral and sends flowers instead. He reluctantly stops by the Indians' store to get some Christmas presents for his staff. Mehring doesn't enjoy the experience because they fawn over him and make him very uncomfortable.

On Christmas day, the workers start celebrating early. Even Mehring has a bottle of whiskey and soon reminisces with Jacobus. They watch a heat storm come in and talk about the dead man. Mehring later walks by the river alone and gets his foot stuck in the deep mud. It is mired for some minutes before it finally comes loose. Mehring thinks that the dead man was grabbing at his foot.

One of the workers, Izak, stops by the Indians' store and finds one of the younger men painting a peace sign on the water tank. They chat, and Izak leaves. The boy's father is not pleased that the controversial symbol might draw unwanted attention to them. Meanwhile, Mehring calls to speak to his ex-wife in New York City, whom

Terry is with. Mehring becomes furious when his ex-wife mentions that Terry is not coming back to South Africa. He was choosing to avoid Terry's mandatory military service, which would bar him from ever returning. Mehring is angry, not because of Terry's bad decision, but because Terry doesn't have the courage to tell him himself.

Suddenly, it starts to rain, and it doesn't stop for two weeks. It is the start of the wet season. A couple in town is killed by a flood, and Mehring is in a panic because the road to the farm is washed out. With the phone lines out of commission too, several days go by when Mehring has no news from the farm. When he finally does get through, he finds that Jacobus has done a fine job taking care of things in his absence.

Mehring picks up a young woman on the way to work who leads him to a remote area under a bridge. Mehring realizes too late that it is probably a trap. Two men come out at him as he lays with the woman. Mehring sprints to his car and leaves them all there, including the woman. He rebukes himself later, thinking that the woman might have been an innocent bystander.

Jacobus leads a procession for the dead man across the hilltop. They are reburying the unknown man, and many of the workers are present. The man is laid to rest. He is now part of them all, and at peace.

Even so, The Conservationist must be seen as an outsider at best. Arguably because - as a book inextricably tied up with apartheid - it's lost some of its political urgency. Partly because it didn't even win outright in 1974 (it shared the award with Stanley Middleton's *Holiday*). Mainly because the poll already looks like it's shaping up to be a popularity contest as much as a serious literary competition and it's hard to imagine The Conservationist coming top in anyone's affections.

Environmental Behavior

It's a book that demands respect, but is hard to love. I can't imagine I'd vote for it over any of the Booker winners I've read so far. So much of my own interaction with novels is predicated on a fuzzy desire for emotional warmth and entertainment that I simply prefer *The Siege Of Krishnapur* or even John Berger's *G*, but that's not a criticism (not of *The Conservationist*, anyway). Gordimer's book is cold, discomfiting and difficult for very good reasons. One of the most impressive and effective things about it is the growing sense of alienation one must feel to the world it presents and, specifically, its lead character.

This is Mehring, a rich, white South African farmer. The sort of capitalist who imagines he has won his riches and privilege through hard work and ability rather than accidents of birth and injustice. A man with a self-

righteous sense of his own worth coupled with a complete inability to understand the human cost of his own wealth. In a sense he is a hopeless figure, stumbling blindly and incomprehendingly through the world, especially on the farm he runs as a tax benefit and imagines as a kind of idyllic rural retreat, but where death, violence and collapse are ever present, just beneath the surface (quite literally in the case of a dead human body, buried early on in a shallow grave). In another sense, this wilful ignorance and arrogance gives Mehring his power and ability to excel, and sets the course towards tragedy - for everyone else.

This double reading is presented by Gordimer with singular concentration and artistry. Every stone on the ground, every step on the way, every gesture and unguarded word is rich with meaning. Her trick is to show us only what Mehring himself encounters, but ensure that we see far more (in the Conradian sense). She presents a world refracted through Mehring's eyes and interpreted in his internal monologues, but our view of it, over the course of the book, changes radically.

He thinks he is a good, generous boss to his farm labourers; we see an oppressor who contemptuously believes he can win friendship with free cigarettes. He imagines himself a careful steward of his farm; we see an unwanted alien, out of tune with the rhythms of the land. He regards himself as an enlightened, intelligent free thinker, too smart to attend the superficial world of drunken parties and clinical sex in the white South African diaspora. We see a loveless, thoughtless bigot and sexual predator.

The Picture of Lower class people

This double-edged writing constantly jabs at our conscience. Sometimes, it's a matter of just one or two words, dropped casually into conversations, or scattered around visual descriptions. When one white farmer tells a black worker about the actions of another white farmer by referring to him as "this master", the phrase explodes like a bomb. A list of the effects of heavy rains (drop in crime, a picture in the paper of a dog rescued from a storm drain etc), is made awful by the seemingly throwaway detail that black children now go to school wrapped up in super-phosphate fertiliser bags.

The intensity of this writing requires serious concentration, especially when coupled with an impressionistic narrative that skips backwards and forwards over time and situates us right inside Mehring's head - an increasingly unpleasant place to be. It's hard work - but is correspondingly effective.

For all the skill that Gordimer displays, however, there remain occasional infelicities. There are a few clunking coincidences (Mehring reads about the death of a friend immediately after a chance and unusual meeting with his

daughter, for instance). There's an unconvincingly narrated sexual encounter on a plane. A few portentous three or four word paragraphs stick out from the smoothness of the rest of the writing like proverbial sore thumbs: "Earth in his mouth." "Safety, solid ground." "Who spoke first?"

Still, such objections are trifling. After reading *The Conservationist*, it's easy to see why its author would go on to achieve such acclaim, why Seamus Heaney would praise her as a "guerrilla of the imagination" and why she should still be taken seriously today - even if she's unlikely to be judged the Best of the Booker.

So far as characterization is concerned, the protagonist's character is evoked through the internalization of consciousness in him. Mehring is a Wealthy industrialist, He is interested in the preservation of natural landscape forbidding himself from dropping even a cigarette-end on his farm-but also interested in improving the society. He has made his fortune from the exploitation of the natural resources, pig iron. The character of Terry, Mehring's son, is more adequately portrayed by Gordimer. Father and son are unable to communicate. They do not talk to each other and do not understand each other. Antonia is Mehring's 'mistress' with whom he enjoys a love-hate relationship. The black perspective in this novel is presented through the character of Jacobus.

The end of the novel is pathetic. It ends with the formal burial of the Black man. Mehring has disappeared from the farm, he is phoned up at his office about money for the coffin, and the black workers perform the ritual that has been denied to the dead no name; no member of his family is present, yet, 'he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them'.(252) Michael Thorpe(1983:190) indicates that "there is no obligation in custom to someone who is not a family member or a revered elder.

The murdered man has dubious associations with the shanty town and may well be a casualty of gang warfare". We find Mehring alone at the end of the novel. There is no one to answer his telephone calls; but he has illusions about the calls. He imagines that the caller is Antonia, his former mistress, while the real caller is Terry with whom he longs for union. This is the alienation of the worst order. All his relations-wife, son and mistress-have left him and he has to sell the land and there is no perpetuation of his line. The labourers who work on the farm will continue, but the ownership will change. The man who worked for the future and for the farm will never return there.

Irony is worked rather subtly at various levels in the novel. The association in Mehring's mind of landscape and objects of sexual desire reveals the irony of his position as 'Conservationist', and there are other instances which confirm this ironic situation. For example: Mehring's neighbor Old De Beer, a landowner, a man

whose size bespeaks prosperity:

“Old De Beer is a handsome man, Oh to wear your manhood, fatherhood like that, eh, stud and authority” (47)

This is Mehring's view which is ironized by a co-existing authorial accent. His relationship with the farm is fundamentally ironic. It is he, as a conservation-minded master, who is obliged to clean up after his 'servants'. Ancestorship is also ironic in the novel, because his son, Terry is possibly homosexual. Mehring loves the land, plants a Spanish chestnuts on the estate for his son's benefit, but Terry lets him down. The black body is a kind of incarnation of irony in the novel. The more Mehring attempts to repress its significance within his own mind, the more decisively it returns to haunt him.

Gordimer makes very efficient use of the device of 'pun'. Mehring says everything in the sense of a pun. As Stephan Clingman (1986:158) argues:

“Puns in *The Conservationist* (as in Freudian theory) refer to a 'subconscious' level of the surface text, and at this level Mehring's future fate is present beneath his every slightest word”.

Everything he says is in this sense a pun, totally laced with irony. Even language participates in the ironic structure of the novel, in particular the central pun, 'nothing'. When the body is first discovered, Jacobus says there is 'nothing for this man' (16). On a realistic level this is correct; there is nothing for the black man and all he represents.

But when in a kind of humble pride of possession Mehring sits in his fields and declares that he 'wants for nothing' (159), his statement is ironic. Mehring says he wants the farm for relaxation, but look at what he 'gives away': “Times to let go, as the saying has it. It's agreed that's what a place like this is for” (156). In short 'nothing' is a central pun which refers both to Mehring's inner condition and to his coming inheritance. Even Mehring's language means the opposite of what he intends. Thinking 'no' when the woman asks him for a lift (252), he nevertheless lets her into his car: repeatedly saying 'No, no' (248-51) to his fate, he is irresistibly drawn towards it and succumbs.

Casual thoughts

Gordimer uses very illuminating metaphors in the novel. For example, the corpse of the obscure black is used as a metaphor. The corpse occupies a central position in Mehring's reflections. It haunts him, “A dead man, but he

doesn't speak the same language....He feels the stirring of the shameful curiosity, like imagining what goes on behind a bathroom door, About what happens under a covering of earth...”(225). He is interrupted in his various moods-disgust, anger and joy. There is the macabre scene: “A pair of shoes appeared. They held still the shape of feet, like the ones put out to dry up at the compound” (245) the corpse surfaces as it is not carefully buried.

Her first published novel, *The Lying Days* (1953), takes place in Gordimer's home town of Springs, Transvaal, an East Rand mining town near Johannesburg. Arguably a semi-autobiographical work, *The Lying Days* is a Bildungsroman, charting the growing political awareness of a young white woman, Helen, toward small-town life and South African racial division.

In her 1963 work, *Occasion for Loving*, Gordimer puts apartheid and love squarely together. Her protagonist, Ann Davis, is married to Boaz Davis, an ethnomusicologist, but in love with Gideon Shibalo, an artist with several failed relationships. Ann Davis is white, however, and Gideon Shibalo is black, and South Africa's government criminalised such relationships.

Gordimer collected the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for A Guest of Honour in 1971 and, in common with a number of winners of this award; she was to go on to win the Booker Prize. The Booker was awarded to Gordimer for her 1974 novel, *The Conservationist*, and was a co-winner with Stanley Middleton's novel *Holiday*. *The Conservationist* explores Zulu culture and the world of a wealthy white industrialist through the eyes of Mehring, the antihero. Per Wästberg described *The Conservationist* as Gordimer's "densest and most poetical novel". Thematically covering the same ground as Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) and J. M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), the "conservationist" seeks to conserve nature to preserve the apartheid system, keeping change at bay. When an unidentified corpse is found on his farm, Mehring does the "right thing" by providing it a proper burial; but the dead person haunts the work, a reminder of the bodies on which Mehring's vision would be built.

Gordimer's 1979 novel *Burger's Daughter* is the story of a woman analyzing her relationship with her father, a martyr to the anti-apartheid movement. The child of two Communist and anti-apartheid revolutionaries, Rosa Burger finds herself drawn into political activism as well. Written in the aftermath of the Soweto uprising, the novel was shortly thereafter banned by the South African government. Gordimer described the novel as a "coded homage" to Bram Fischer, the lawyer who defended Nelson Mandela and other anti-apartheid activists.

As pointed out by Laurence Perrine (1959:307), the novelist uses the point of view as a device for solving his

difficulties. It is the point of view from which the story is told. In *The Conservationist*, Gordimer presents

Mehring's capitalist point of view. His conviction that only a productive farm can be beautiful is a mercenary view, but also one of efficient husbandry. (64) Thus, Mehring displays concern for the eco- system of his farm after fire damage. He articulates a concern for inter - independence of flora and fauna.

He also lays plans for the future in planting oaks (140) and European chestnuts (210). It means that the planting of no-indigenous varieties is both conservation and colonization. There is a sense in which his desire for the land is industrialist associated with the development. As Christopher Hope (1975:54) states: "In his international ventures, selling pig-iron to the Japanese, Mehring represents an additional penetration in this period: of a unified national capital into the international market."

In *The Conservationist*, Gordimer endeavors for the first time to take on the perspective of a black African, exploring the thoughts and experiences of some of the workers on the farm, and especially Mehring's foreman Jacobus, as well as the Indian shopkeepers just off the property. With this careful work, I was able to experience South African society of the early 1970s when the rigid distinctions between each culture are beginning to fray. Both from within and as the next generation courageously crosses the line. It's a tense scenario and risky for everyone involved. Gordimer's pinpointing and depiction of these both dangerous and hopeful moments increase the novel's consequence.

As the story progresses, the narration becomes more jarring and disconnected. Mehring, more and more emotionally marooned, rejects the overtures of his former friends and settles further into his imagined conversations and daydreams. He hides out at his farm, trying to establish some sort of connection with the land he wants desperately to believe is rightfully his. His sorrow, indignation and uncertainty are palpable, and he keeps denying the fact that he's nothing but an interloper while at the same time coming to the unsettling realization that the people who originally belonged to the land now work for him.

CONCLUSION

The Conservationist is told in the third person. The point of view is taken mostly from Mehring and Jacobus' view of day-to-day life in the city and on the farm. The monotony of farm tasks is delved into, as well as the monotony of business life. Mehring uses Jacobus to ensure that the detail jobs are completed. More importantly, Jacobus is the liaison between Mehring and his workers. Jacobus is the focal point between

management and employee. As such, he often finds himself in situations where he is truly torn between the two. Jacobus feels loyalty to his employer, who has done a lot for him financially but doesn't really know him. He also feels loyalty to his people, the workers, who he tries to help out when he can.

Another grammatical structural device used by Gordimer in the novel is 'tense'. The first section of the novel is closely aligned to Mehring, and reports, in present tense, largely from his spatio-temporal perspective: "Swaying over the ruts to the gate of the third pasture, Sunday morning the owner of the farm suddenly sees: a clutch of pale freckled eggs..."(9) The section reports what Mehring experiences, moving from a position of considerable distance to a character-internal account of matters.

In referring to his as *The Farmer*, the narrator uses perfective and progressive and progressive aspects, For example, "He has left the road and struck out across the veld"(10), "He is crossing a Lucerne field" (21), etc. The later style is evident, for example, when Mehring reflects on the fact that the black farmhands have evidently inspected the body of the man found murdered in one of the fields:

"So they have touched the thing, lifted the face. Of course, the dark glasses might have been in a pocket. No money. Not surprising; these Friday murders are for money, what else...."(17)

In a nutshell, Gordimer uses a variety of styles to suggest the often ironic relationships between the self and the other, the individual a society. A totally different discourse enters the narrative, undermining the kinds of analysis that seems to dominate the story as in *The Conservationist*. In short, *The Conservationist* has all the techniques of a modern novel; symbols and metaphor flood it.

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