Marek Pawlicki

“Enactments of Life”: The Short Stories of Nadine Gordimer

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Nadine Gordimer (1923–2014) was a South African writer, the author of fifteen novels and eleven collections of short stories. She was a member of the African National Congress (ANC), one of the founders of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW), a Nobel Prize laureate, a Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters, the Vice President of PEN, and the holder of numerous honorary doctorates. Gordimer also served on the board of the Foundation of Arts and Culture formed by the ANC. She was awarded one of South Africa's highest honours, the Order of the Southern Cross (silver medal).

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Introduction:

A "Scrupulously Personal Approach": Introducing Nadine Gordimer's Conception of Writing

Searching for Truth: "The Final Word of Words"

Speaking to the auditorium gathered at the Swedish Academy in Stockholm on 7 December 1991, Nadine Gordimer concluded her Nobel Lecture with the following, paragraph-long sentence:

> The writer is of service to humankind only insofar as the writer uses the word even against his or her loyalties, trusts the state of being, as it is revealed, to hold somewhere in its complexity filaments of the cord of truth, able to be bound together, here and there, in art: trusts the state of being to yield somewhere fragmentary phrases of truth, which is the final word of words, never changed by our stumbling efforts to spell it out and write it down, never changed by lies, by semantic sophistry, by the dirtying of the word for the purposes of racism, sexism, prejudice, domination, the glorification of destruction, the curses and the praise-songs.[1]

This statement is important enough to be quoted in full since it encapsulates the key beliefs that guided Gordimer throughout her writing career: first of all, that the responsibility of every writer is to look for truth; secondly, that this truth is to be found in life ("the state of being"), not in ideology of any kind, be it political or religious; and, most importantly, that since the role of literature is to give insight into truth unobscured by ideology, writers are

1 Nadine Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History: Notes from Our Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 206.

obliged to distance themselves from their political and social allegiances; indeed, they must be ready to scrutinize their ideological positions and, if needs be, criticize various misuses and manipulations of truth.

Two notions are of central importance in Gordimer's writing: life and truth, and where they appear, they are usually mentioned together. One non-fiction text in which those ideas recur is her lecture "Adam's Rib: Fictions and Realities" (1994), published three years after her Nobel Lecture. In "Adam's Rib," Gordimer pointed out that the role of writers is to observe people closely, remember fragments of those observations, and then transform those insights into literature. According to Gordimer, writers work in the dynamic medium of life, where that which is elusive is of no less importance than that which is graspable. The only stable principle in this medium is change understood as constant—and not always predictable—evolution of the characters' thoughts and motivations. On the basis of her understanding of life as dynamic and changeable, Gordimer formulated her version of truth based on faithfulness to other people's experiences. This fleeting kind of subjective truth, referred to as "a vapour of the truth condensed,"[2] can only be reached through creative imagination and talent. Taking this definition of subjective, experiential truth, she formed her understanding of fiction as "an enactment of life,"[3] in which characters, defined as "imaginatively embodied discourse,"[4] are revealed but at the same time keep some of their secrets to themselves, leaving both writers and readers in a state of tension between knowledge and conjecture. Gordimer's conception of literature, discussed at length in Chapter One, allows us to better understand her aim in writing not only her novels but also her shorter works; indeed, it is both justified and accurate to call her stories "enactments of life."

As I have mentioned, Gordimer argued that truth was to be found in the life of a given person, specifically the ambitions, desires, and motivations that drive this person in their actions. Exploring the life of the individual is what she referred to as a "scrupulously personal approach."[5] This approach informed her writing well before her Nobel Lecture, which is evident from the fact that the quoted phrase is taken from her 1964 letter to her *New Yorker* editor Roger

2 Nadine Gordimer, *Writing and Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 12.

3 Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, 18.

4 Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, 18.

5 Gordimer to Angell, 1 May 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

Angell. In this letter, she explained that while the style of writing and subject matter of her short stories had naturally evolved over the years, one belief had remained unchanged:

> I had hoped—and hope—to bring to to [sic] people who could be dismissed as categorical 'victims,' 'oppressors' etc., exactly the same scrupulously personal approach that I have always used for people whose labels are not so easily read—in fact, I have wanted to peel off the labels, as it were.[6]

In this passage, Gordimer uses the logic of disclosure to emphasize that her goal has always been to uncover the complexity of the human character—the subtle, sometimes conflicting forces governing people's thoughts and actions. This is both an aesthetic and a social undertaking: aesthetic—because, as she believed, the quality of writing lies in its insightfulness, in other words, its ability to convey the truth about life; social—because in a conception of literature where the aesthetic is closely tied to the political, conveying the complexity of human motivations and thus exposing false perceptions is ultimately directed at bringing about social and political change, in this case, a change of attitude in the readers.

The conclusion of this brief, preliminary discussion brings us to the central argument in this book: Gordimer's works are defined by her belief that while literature is shaped by politics, literary works are an adequate response to a given political situation only if they give us political, social, and psychological insight into the thoughts and actions of people living at a particular point in time. She elevated this insight to the level of truth, arguing that this truth lies in the complexity of human motivations and the dynamics of human interactions. It is not a factual but an experiential truth, and it can be defined as faithfulness both to the writer's experience and to the experience of the people described. Insofar as experiential truth takes us to the interiority of a given protagonist, it is ambiguous and subject to change, as human beings are often driven by motivations that are neither consistent nor wholly understandable to them. Since this truth is only caught at a given point in the development of the protagonist, it is also fragmentary in its nature. This

6 Gordimer to Angell, 1 May 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

latter point is especially pertinent in the context of the short stories, which concentrate on a very limited time in the lives of their protagonists—sometimes even a few hours.

To show how Gordimer sought to convey the experiential truth about people living in her times is the main aim of this study. While the book will include references to her novels, its main focus will be on her short stories. It is important to read those works against the background of her changing political views but, at the same time, not to treat politics as the ultimate horizon of their interpretation. That Gordimer insisted on this irreducibility of her works can be read as an expression of her strong belief in the importance of writers who invest their efforts in the pursuit of the dynamic, fleeting, and unpredictable forces that shape human existence. Evident in this belief is the strong conviction that literature stands in opposition to political propaganda, whose aim is to describe human existence in terms of unambiguous and authoritative formulations. In this sense, seeking fragmentary, dynamic, and elusive truths about human existence is both an expression of fascination with life and a gesture of rebellion against various ideologists and propagandists, like those who created, developed, and enforced the doctrine of apartheid.

Gordimer's Stories: A Survey of Critical Perspectives

Gordimer once called the short story "the literary form that is both punishingly strict and yet wide and deep enough to contain a world—if you have the skill to handle it in microcosm."[7] Gordimer's stories attest to her ability to create microcosms so complex and nuanced that they can safely stand comparison with the fictional worlds created in her novels. While Gordimer's stories have not yet received the critical attention they deserve, they have been the subject of some critical inquiries, both articles, essays, and book chapters. The aim of this section is to provide an overview of those critical studies, which will later serve as points of reference in the discussion of her stories.

Literary critics began to take a critical interest in Gordimer's works in the early 1970s. In the first full-length monograph devoted to her works, Robert F. Haugh's *Nadine Gordimer* (1974), Gordimer's stories are given pride of place: the book opens with four chapters examining her stories and continues with five

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7 Nadine Gordimer, review of *The Hajji and Other Stories*, by Ahmed Essop, 1988. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

chapters that focus on her novels. In the introduction, Haugh puts emphasis on the stories, praising them for their insights into the reality of South Africa; as he writes, "to read her stories is to know Africa."[8] Haugh's aim in this pioneering study is clearly to put Gordimer on the literary map for American readers, some of whom—by the early 1970s—must have heard of Gordimer since her stories were regularly published by leading American magazines and newspapers of the day. Adopting a tone that is disconcertingly laudatory and patronising at the same time, Haugh summarises at length Gordimer's stories, discussing both their strengths (above all, her gift of conveying the thoughts and emotions of her characters through epiphany) and their weaknesses (for example, what Haugh sees as her tendency to use her characters to voice her political opinions). What may strike the contemporary reader is his lack of interest in the social and political reality of South Africa: while he does make occasional references to racial segregation and the pass laws, his focus is on how the stories convey the psychological reality of the protagonists.

Gordimer's rise to fame as an internationally renowned writer is reflected in the articles and books published in the 1980s. In the mid-1980s, three notable articles devoted to Gordimer's stories came out: Barbara Eckstein's "Pleasure and Joy: Political Activism in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories" (*World Literature Today* 1985, vol. 59, no. 3), Evelyn Schroth's "Nadine Gordimer's 'A Chip of Glass Ruby': A Commentary on Apartheid Society" (*Journal of Black Studies* 1986, vol. 17, no. 1), and Martin Trump's "The Short Fiction of Nadine Gordimer" (*Research in African Literatures* 1986, vol. 17, no. 3). Eckstein's and Schroth's articles point to a new direction in Gordimer's criticism insofar as both of them focus on the socio-political reality described in her stories and give justice to the political dimension of those works. Eckstein's article is particularly noteworthy insofar as it gives valuable insight into the political motivations driving the protagonists of Gordimer's fiction. Unlike the critical interventions of Eckstein and Schroth, which focus only on a limited number of stories (only one in Schroth's case), Martin Trump's long article is a chronological discussion of Gordimer's short fiction, starting from the stories published in the 1950s and ending on those that came out in the early 1980s. Organized according to the themes and topics recurrent in her short fiction, Trump's study is intended as a neat and helpful guide for the critics interested in Gordimer's works; as such, it is also indicative of the growing critical interest in her oeuvre.

8 Robert Haugh, *Nadine Gordimer* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974), 13.

Arguably, the most important critical study to emerge in the 1980s was Stephen Clingman's *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, first published in 1986, and reprinted in 1992 and 1993. Divided into seven chapters, each describing a new stage in Gordimer's political and aesthetic development, Clingman's study is a chronological discussion of the first eight novels by Gordimer from *The Lying Days* (1953) to *July's People* (1981).[9] Also analysed in the book are fifteen stories by Gordimer, from those published in the 1940s and included in her first collection *Face to Face* (1949) to those that came out in the 1970s and were collected in *A Soldier's Embrace* (1981). Explaining his choice of material, Clingman argues that the novel as a literary form is more relevant in the context of his historically and politically focused analysis of Gordimer's fiction: "To put it simply, the novel is both more intensive and more extensive historically than the short story could ever be."[10] It is due to this conviction that Clingman treats Gordimer's stories mostly as supplements to her novels, arguing that because of the confines of their form, the stories are incapable of giving the readers the complex and nuanced vision of "history from the inside" offered in her novels.

A more balanced critical perspective is adopted by Dorothy Driver in her essay "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women," included in the collection *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer* (1990), edited by Rowland Smith. One of the first feminist readings of Gordimer's works, Driver's essay focuses on the novels, but it also gives justice to the nuanced presentation of women in her stories, especially those collected in the first three volumes. The early stories are also of interest to Kevin Magarey, who in his essay "Cutting the Jewel: Facets of Art in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories," also found in Smith's volume, gives a stylistic and structural analysis of Gordimer's stories published in the first four collections. While Magarey's article does register the political context of her works, its focus is clearly on the stories that depict the fears, desires, and ambitions of their white middle-class protagonists.

Gordimer's rise in popularity following her 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature led to a series of critical publications, one of which is *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer* (1993), edited by Bruce King. Divided into three parts, this volume includes

9 The 1993 Bloomsbury edition includes a Preface, in which Clingman briefly discusses Gordimer's later novels, including *A Sport of Nature* (1987) and *My Son's Story* (1991).

10 Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 19.

a section entirely devoted to Gordimer's short fiction, in which readers can find articles by Karen Lazar ("Feminism as 'Piffling'? Ambiguities in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories"), Alan R. Lomberg ("Once More into the Burrows: Gordimer's Later Short Fiction"), and Jeanne Colleran ("Archive of Apartheid: Nadine Gordimer's Short Fiction at the End of the Interregnum"). While Lazar's fine article is a feminist study of Gordimer's short fiction, Lomberg and Colleran focus their attention on the political context of her stories, acknowledging what Lomberg calls "one of Gordimer's persistent concerns—chronicling life in her country and the changes that evolve over the years."[11] This increased focus on the political is hardly surprising insofar as it reflects the evolution of her stories in the 1970s and the 1980s, but it is also true that the critics writing in the 1990s began to see the stories as a token of Gordimer's strong political engagement in the affairs of her country. This tendency can also be observed in Karen Lazar's two articles published in scholarly magazines: "Jump and Other Stories: Gordimer's Leap into the 1990s: Gender and Politics in Her Latest Short Fiction" (*Journal of Southern African Studies* 1992, vol. 18, no. 4) and the excellent study of Gordimer's novella "Something Out There" in "'Something Out There'/ Something in There: Gender and Politics in Gordimer's Novella" (*English in Africa* 1992, vol. 19, no. 1).

Gordimer's short fiction did not go unnoticed by authors of critical monographs devoted to her novels. Two such studies were published in the first half of the 1990s: Andrew Vogel Ettin's *Betrayals of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer* (1993) and, more importantly, Dominic Head's study *Nadine Gordimer* (1994). In a chapter entirely devoted to her stories, Head mentions Robert Haugh's early study of her works, arguing that the short story has all too often been seen as a form that exemplifies "technical perfection"[12] and "aesthetic completeness."[13] Situating himself in opposition to this viewpoint, Head points to ambiguity, or "productive ambiguity,"[14] as a constitutive feature of the short story genre. His attention set on the silences and contradictions in Gordimer's stories, Head sheds light on Gordimer's exploration of the racist mindset (especially in first-person unreliable narratives)

11 Alan Lomberg, "Once More into the Burrows," in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, ed. Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1993), 231.

12 Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 161.

13 Head, *Nadine Gordimer*, 161

14 Head, *Nadine Gordimer*, 165.

and on her treatment of political activism, both in the context of white and black South Africans. Head's chapter also reflects the increasing (at the time) critical interest in how Gordimer's stories present social space and its control in a racist society (a topic that is central in John Cooke's *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes* (1985)).

Gordimer's popularity continued to attract the attention of readers and critics—including those from outside of South Africa—in the years immediately following the fall of apartheid. In 1995, Rose Pettersson published the critical study *Nadine Gordimer's One Story of a State Apart*, in which she explores the effects of the repressive political system of South Africa on the lives of the country's inhabitants, as depicted in Gordimer's novels, from *The Lying Days* (1953) to *My Son's Story* (1990). The year 2000 saw the publication of two monographs entirely devoted to her fiction: Ileana Dimitriu's *Art of Conscience: Re-reading Nadine Gordimer* and Brighton J. Uledi-Kamanga's *Cracks in the Wall: Nadine Gordimer's Fiction and the Irony of Apartheid.* While Uledi-Kamanga's study focuses on Gordimer's novels (although it should be added that he does mention several stories in his second chapter, and his fourth chapter is an extended discussion of the novella "Something Out There"), Ileana Dimitriu devotes one of three chapters to Gordimer's short fiction, discussing the stories collected in *The Soft Voice of the Serpent and Other Stories* (1952) and *Jump and Other Stories* (1991).

The first decade of the 21st century brought two more studies of Gordimer's fiction. In *Truer than Fiction: Nadine Gordimer Writing Post-Apartheid South Africa* (2008), Karina Magdalena Szczurek proposed informative and thorough analyses of her later novels and short story collections, including what remains the best critical inquiry into Gordimer's eleventh novel *None to Accompany Me* (1994). Four years later, the University of Cape Town Press released a translation of Denise Brahimi's collected articles titled *Nadine Gordimer: Weaving Together Fiction, Women and Politics* (2012). Focused mainly on novels, beginning with *A World of Strangers* (1958) and ending with *The House Gun* (1998), the study concludes with several brief but interesting insights into Gordimer's selected stories. Gordimer's novels are also at the centre of Maria-Luiz Caraivan's book *Nadine Gordimer and the Rhetoric of Otherness in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (2016), in which Caraivan investigates such topics as the legacy of South Africa's violent past, migration and exile, social and cultural alterity, and political changes in South Africa in the times of globalization. Several short stories,

both from early and later collections, are mentioned to complement the discussion of Gordimer's fiction, especially in the interesting discussion of exile in Chapter One.

While the critical studies mentioned above do contain chapters and passages that pertain to Gordimer's short fiction, it is academic journals that have published the most noteworthy analyses of her stories. Among the articles that came out after the year 2000 is Mary West's feminist reading of Gordimer's selected stories, "Portraits in Miniature: Speaking South African Women in Selected Short Stories by Nadine Gordimer" (*English in Africa* 2010, vol. 37, no. 1), and a series of articles by Ileana Dimitriu. One of the most prolific among Gordimer's critics, Dimitriu is the author of three fine articles on her post-apartheid fiction: "Shifts in Gordimer's Recent Short Fiction: Story-Telling after Apartheid" (*Current Writing* 2005, vol. 17), "'Living in a Frontierless Land': Nadine Gordimer and Cultural Globalization" (*British and American Studies* 2011, no. 17), and "Novelist or Short-Story Writer? New Approaches to Gordimer's Short Fiction" (*British and American Studies* 2012, no. 18). Gordimer's post-apartheid stories were also explored by Graham Riach in his excellent article "The Late Nadine Gordimer" (*Journal of Southern African Studies*, 2016). Riach's study of Gordimer's late prose focuses on the collections *Jump* (1991), *Loot* (2003), and *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* (2007).

The most notable recent publication on Gordimer's stories is a 2019 issue of the journal *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* (vol. 41, no. 2) titled *Nadine Gordimer: De-Linking, Interrupting, Severing*. This important critical intervention includes eight articles, seven of which concentrate on her short fiction. In the introduction to the volume, Fiona McCann and Kerry-Jane Wallart, referring to Graham Riach's article, put forward the thesis that "interruptions, disruptions, disjunctions, cracks, breaks and fractures are still very much apparent in a number of [Gordimer's] works, early or late."[15] This argument is taken up by Stephen Clingman in "Gordimer, Interrupted" (discussed at greater length at the end of Chapter One of this book), in which he sets out to demonstrate that interruption is the underlying logic of Gordimer's writing. Both Clingman and the editors of the volume view interruption as a possible new mode of reading Gordimer's works, but this methodology is only loosely followed by

15 Fiona McCann and Kerry-Jane Wallart, "Nadine Gordimer: De-Linking, Interrupting, Severing. Introduction," *Nadine Gordimer: De-Linking, Interrupting, Severing, Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 5, https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.413.

the contributors, who offer their own insights into Gordimer's fiction. In the article "'[S]he Has a Knife in [Her] Hand': Writing/Cutting in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories," Pascale Tollance draws the readers' attention to the gaps and silences in Gordimer's short fiction, arguing that Gordimer's refusal to end stories with closure and resolution exposes the problems and divisions in her country. In "Nadine Gordimer's Strangely Uncanny Realistic Stories: The Chaos and the Mystery of It All," Liliane Louvel shows how Gordimer uses the mysterious and the uncanny to destabilize the reader's expectations. The most interesting and engaging part of the article is a syntactical analysis of Gordimer's prose, which shows how she consistently postpones the end of the sentence, thus forcing the reader to attend closely to the text. Among other notable studies in the volume is Kerry-Jane Wallart's "Failing to Place Confrontation: The Car as 'Void' in *Jump*," which focuses on Gordimer's descriptions of cars as spaces that convey the delusions and injustices of apartheid. Gordimer's post-apartheid fiction is also at the centre of Vivek Santayana's article "By 'the Flash of the Fireflies': Multi-Focal Forms of Critique in Nadine Gordimer's Late Short Story Cycles," which offers insights into South Africa's colonial past by investigating the non-linear and multitemporal character of Gordimer's short fiction.

The year 2019 also brought the publication of Rita Barnard's article "Locating Gordimer. Modernism, Postcolonialism, Realism," in which Barnard convincingly demonstrates that Gordimer's writing—both her novels and short stories—can be viewed as an example of "situated postcolonial modernism."[16] It is worthwhile to add that Barnard is also the author of the study *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (2007), whose Chapter Two ("Leaving the House of the White Race") is one of the best—alongside John Cooke's *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes* (1985)—critical discussions of space in Gordimer's fiction, including her short stories.

Finally, it is worthwhile to note that Gordimer's stories have also been the subject of Chris Power's article "Rebel, Radical, Relic? Nadine Gordimer is Out of Fashion—We Must Keep Reading Her," published in *The Guardian* on 31 July 2019. Power's main argument is that following Gordimer's death

16 Rita Barnard, "Locating Gordimer," in *Modernism, Postcolonialism, and Globalism: Anglophone Literature, 1950 to the Present*, ed. Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 100–101.

in 2014, her stories have not received the attention they deserve. One reason for this fall in popularity is the enduring tendency to view her works only in the context of the historical situation in which they were created. As Power pointed out, "[Gordimer] was defined by a historical moment, the apartheid era, and now it appears she has been trapped by it."[17] Power's engaging article was an attempt to re-introduce Gordimer's short stories to the contemporary reader. This critical study hopes to achieve a similar goal by offering its readers the first comprehensive study entirely devoted to her short fiction. It is my contention that only a book-length study can do justice to Gordimer's stories, showing their thematic and stylistic development across her seventy-year-long writing career.

Rereading Gordimer's Stories: A Focus on Recurrence

Readers of Gordimer's shorter works are likely to notice that they are governed by the logic of recurrence. A revealing comment on this pattern can be found in Gordimer's introduction to *Selected Stories* (1975), in which she explains—among other things—the principles that lay behind her choice of stories for this book. She begins the introduction with the self-conscious comment that while none of the stories have been changed or rewritten for the present volume, the very process of selection was a kind of rewriting, in the course of which she came to the following realization:

> [T]here are some stories I have gone on writing, again and again, all my life, not so much because the themes are obsessional but because I found other ways to take hold of them; because I hoped to make the revelation of new perceptions through the different techniques these demanded.[18]

Although this comment was made specifically in the context of stories from her first five collections, the insight also applies to the volumes that followed. Throughout her career as a short story writer, Gordimer returned to certain

17 Chris Power, "Rebel, Radical, Relic? Nadine Gordimer is Out of Fashion – We Must Keep Reading Her," *The Guardian*, July 31, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/31/rebel-radical-relic-nadine-gordimer-is-out-of-fashion-we-must-keep-reading-her.

18 Nadine Gordimer, *Selected Stories* (London: Cape, 1975), 10.

people, places, and situations, seeking new insights into the topics that engaged her as an artist and a human being.

The logic of recurrence that governs her oeuvre has been used as a structural principle for this study. Divided into distinct thematic groups, the short stories are discussed chronologically with the aim of showing the new ways in which Gordimer "took hold" of certain topics, including the socio-political injustices of apartheid and its legacy in contemporary South Africa, the role and nature of political commitment, Jewishness and the immigrant experience, male-female and parent-child relationships, and, finally, environmental issues. This type of analysis, which is both thematic and chronological (insofar as each chapter begins with a discussion of Gordimer's earliest stories, ending on her last ones), has the merit of tracing the development of her views on the topics that preoccupied her both in her prose and in her non-fiction writing.

This book is composed of seven chapters. Chapter One describes the beginning of Gordimer's literary career and her evolving understanding of writing and the role of the writer, as reflected in the lectures, essays, and articles that she published from the 1950s to the 2000s. A large part of this chapter is devoted to a detailed analysis of the cooperation with *The New Yorker*, especially the impact of the journal's conception of the short story on her early work. Since Gordimer's views on politics and writing were closely intertwined, Chapter One then traces the development of the short stories against the background of her political convictions, especially her radicalization in the 1970s and the 1980s, including its impact on her understanding of the role of the writer in society. It is shown that Gordimer's career was defined by her decisive rejection of liberal humanism and her radicalization, which resulted in her decision to embrace the role of the writer as a politically committed intellectual, whose goal is both to describe social change and to participate in it. This description of her political and artistic development serves as a framework for the discussion of the short stories, beginning from those published in the late 1940s to those that came out in the 2000s.

Since many of Gordimer's works are informed by her experience of life during apartheid, the focus of this book—especially Chapter Two and Chapter Three—is on ways in which her short fiction can deepen our understanding of those turbulent times. Chapter Two explores the relationships between white and black South Africans in apartheid and post-apartheid stories. The discussion begins with an interpretation of the stories that expose racist beliefs and

attitudes in first-person narratives. It then considers the works that convey Gordimer's criticism of the various ways in which acts of communication are thwarted and subjected to egoistic and biased personal agendas. After describing the connection between socio-economic privilege and the attitude of entitlement among white South Africans, the chapter looks at those post-apartheid stories in which she sought to convey the beliefs and attitudes of "individuals and peoples recreating themselves"[19] and, in this process, confronting the legacy of apartheid.

Chapter Three debates the issue of political involvement. The stories discussed here show Gordimer's progression from her liberal humanist stance to one characterized by more radical social and political demands. Of special interest is that period in the mid-1960s which led to her increased preoccupation with politics, or, as she put it in a letter to her *New Yorker* editor Roger Angell, "my increasing involvement with—not politics, but the things that politics do to people"[20] (this important assertion is quoted and discussed in detail in Chapter One). From the mid-1960s, Gordimer devoted considerable attention to the various ways in which social and political ideals affect the motivations of her characters and the relationships that shape their lives. Those stories illustrate her conception of writing which explores the political ("the things that politics do to people") without losing sight of the personal.

Chapter Four concentrates on selected stories from all stages of Gordimer's career with the aim of exploring her Jewish background and its impact on her writing. My main argument is that while Gordimer was a declared atheist throughout her life, she continued to be inspired by Jewish history and tradition, as is apparent both from her novels and her stories. The chapter begins with a reference to Michael Wade's seminal article on Gordimer's prose, specifically Wade's contention that Jewishness in her works is "an exploration of the absent, the unwritten, the repressed."[21] The central thesis of the chapter is that Jewishness in Gordimer's prose should not be seen solely as a token of Gordimer's failure to confront her family's history; rather, the severed connection

19 Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times: Writing and Living, 1954–2008* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 531.

20 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 1 May 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

21 Michael Wade, "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject," in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, ed. Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1993), 155.

with her Jewish legacy is the background against which she explores other topics, such as relationships within the family, alienation and political marginalization of immigrants, the impact of traumatic events on the first and the second generation, and, finally, her approach to literature and creativity.

Chapters Five and Six examine Gordimer's numerous stories about families. Taking as its starting point her comment that one of her "central themes" is "the way human beings use power in their relationships,"[22] Chapter Five explores the bonds between men and women. The chapter is divided into several topics which preoccupied Gordimer throughout her career, one of which is the influence of patriarchal ideology on women in the wider context of social relations in South Africa. Of special interest here is the dissemination of ideologically conditioned claims about sex in the family and in the community. Another topic analysed in this chapter is the destructive influence of apartheid on interracial relationships between men and women. The chapter also discusses the stories about the conflicts and crises in marriages against the background of political events in South Africa.

Chapter Six is devoted to child-parent relationships in Gordimer's works. The chapter begins with a discussion that concentrates on the various ways in which parents assert their authority over their children and try to enforce certain patterns of behaviour through ideological pressure. It then looks at stories that feature female protagonists who are influenced, in different ways, by their families and by their social milieu. While in those stories the father is mostly a background presence, the few works that examine his influence on children—especially on sons—are also worth analysing. Characterized by self-reflexivity, they can be read in the context of Gordimer's views on writing. As is the case with other stories discussed in the chapter, those works are consistent with her conception of writing that intertwines the individual and the representative, the personal and the political, both exploring the intricacies of human relationships and commenting on social and political events.

Chapter Seven offers an ecocritical reading of selected short stories. The main argument here is that for Gordimer the imperative to explore the world by means of the written word referred not only to the world of people but also to the natural environment, first of all, because the two cannot be separated, and, secondly, because socio-political and ecological critiques in her prose are

22 Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 259.

often deeply interconnected. The chapter begins with a discussion of stories that expose colonial attitudes towards the environment and their implication in systems of exploitation directed against both people and animals. This part of the chapter also looks at the works that juxtapose oppression aimed against people with violence directed against animals. The last part of the discussion focuses on the short stories published in the late 1990s and the 2000s that concentrate on environmental degradation in the context of poverty.

It is important to note that, at the most general level, Gordimer did not strictly differentiate between her novels and stories, looking upon all her literary works as her lifelong attempt to "build the pattern of [her] own perception out of chaos,"[23] or, as she put it more succinctly, "to make sense of life."[24] This attempt, or "story,"[25] as she referred to her oeuvre, is so rich and varied that no single critical perspective can do justice to its complexity. Based on this contention, this study offers an eclectic methodology comprised of several critical approaches, depending on the topics explored in her stories. The backbone of this methodology is constituted by the numerous studies relating to Gordimer's works (both stories and novels), most of which have been mentioned in the previous subchapter. The studies of Stephen Clingman, Rita Barnard, Graham Huggan, Judie Newman, Ileana Dimitriu, Dominic Head, Barbara Eckstein, and Evelyn Schroth are some of the important points of reference in Chapters Two and Three, which concentrate on the impact of history and politics on Gordimer's works; moreover, Chapter Two also brings to bear Zygmunt Bauman's postmodern ethics to explore interracial relationships in Gordimer's prose. Chapter Four, examining the impact of Gordimer's Jewish background on her works, was written in dialogue both with Michael Wade's seminal article on Jewishness in Gordimer's novel *A Sport of Nature* (1987) and with articles on the historical and cultural legacy of Jews in South Africa by Aušra Paulaskienė, Peter Beinart, Linda Weinhouse, Claudia Braude, and Joseph Sherman. Similarly to the preceding chapters, Chapters Five and Six, devoted to the dynamics of male-female and child-parent relationships, are based both on the existing critical studies of Gordimer's works (including those by Dorothy Driver, Karen Lazar, Kathrin Wagner, Mary West, John Cooke, and Denise Brahimi) and—in the case of Chapter Five—on the works of feminist writers, including Simone

23 Gordimer, *Selected Stories*, 9.

24 Gordimer, *Selected Stories*, 9.

25 Gordimer, *Selected Stories*, 9.

de Beauvoir, Germaine Greer, Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone, and Betty Friedan, all of whom expressed views that are pertinent in the context of her works. The final chapter of the study, situated at the interstices of social and environmental issues, adopts as its methodology the ecocritical theories of Lawrence Buell (especially his notion of the environmental unconscious) and of Byron Caminero-Santangelo (the idea of the socioecological unconscious), but it also takes into account the analysis of Gordimer’s writing by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin. The scarcity of references to the critical studies of Gordimer’s fiction in this chapter is explained by the fact that few ecocritical readings of her stories exist—a critical lacuna that this chapter hopes to fill.

I would like to conclude this part of the discussion by once again referring to Gordimer’s contention that writing is “an enactment of life.”[26] Claiming that no methodology is capable of capturing the essence of life, Gordimer posed the following question in her Nobel Lecture: “Perhaps there is no other way of reaching some understanding of being than through art?”[27] Gordimer strongly believed that by using their imagination, intuition, and experience to explore life, in other words, “trust[ing] the state of being,” writers can reach what she called “fragmentary phrases of truth.”[28] If this artistic truth is to have any value, it has to reflect life in its dynamism and complexity. Exploring the experiential, ambiguous, dynamic, and fragmentary truth at the heart of Gordimer’s writing involves considering in depth her evolving understanding of political and artistic commitment, as expressed in her numerous lectures, articles, essays, interviews, and private correspondence. Since one of the main aims of this study is to analyse in detail Gordimer’s development as a writer and public intellectual, the mentioned non-fiction texts will often be quoted, discussed, and juxtaposed with her stories and novels. It will be shown that for Gordimer pursuing the truth about life in her country entailed writing about the political forces that governed it, but at the same time not omitting the intensely private worlds of human relationships. By observing this truth, which informed Gordimer’s writing throughout her career, this book hopes to give justice both to the human and the political dimensions of her works.

26 Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, 18.

27 Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History*, 199.

28 Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History*, 206.

A Note on the Stories Discussed in This Book

A vast majority of Gordimer's stories were first published in various magazines, be it South African (e.g., *South African Opinion*, *Jewish Affairs*, *Trek*), American (e.g., *The New Yorker*, *The Yale Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Common Sense*), or British (e.g., *Encounter*, *The London Magazine*, *The Cornhill Magazine*, *New Statesman*, *London Review of Books*, *Granta*). While the works published in those magazines are invariably first editions, the stories discussed in this study will be taken from her eleven collections: *Face to Face* (1949), *The Soft Voice of the Serpent and Other Stories* (1952), *Six Feet of the Country: Fifteen Short Stories* (1956), *Friday's Footprint and Other Stories* (1960), *Not for Publication and Other Stories* (1965), *Livingstone's Companions* (1971), *A Soldier's Embrace* (1980), *Something Out There* (1984), *Jump and Other Stories* (1991), *Loot and Other Stories* (2003), and *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* (2007). The reason for this choice is that while she frequently made changes to her texts, as proposed and requested by editors of various magazines, she came back to the first version of her stories when she worked on the mentioned collections. Since the focus of this book is on Gordimer's vision of the short story rather than on her cooperation with various editors, the focus will be primarily on book editions. Nonetheless, it should be added that her writing, especially at the beginning of her literary career, was—to a certain extent—shaped by the opinion of those whom she met and with whom she corresponded. Chapter One tries to give justice to this influence by quoting from and commenting on Gordimer's letters with her editors and agents. Since Gordimer was cooperative when working with her editors—one reason for this was, no doubt, that through much of her career, she depended on the publication of her short stories in magazines for her income[29]—she frequently reflected upon them in an attempt to justify her thematic choices and stylistic strategies. Some of her comments will also be considered—not as voices carrying any kind of final authority but as points of reference in the chapters that follow. The publishing history of each story mentioned in this book will be given in parentheses next to its title.

29 She makes this point in her essay "The Short Story in South Africa," which will be discussed at length in Chapter One, and in a 1964 letter to her British publisher Victor Gollancz, in which she stated that the income from the publishing of individual stories in magazines sometimes exceeded the royalties from her books.

Gordimer's short fiction will be discussed against the background of literary and biographical material found in her archive in the Lilly Library in Bloomington: unpublished stories, revisions of those that were published, and correspondence with various editors, most importantly from *The New Yorker* magazine. While most of the archival work for this book will be evident in Chapter One, the chapters that follow will also make references to the manuscripts of her stories.

Because this study has been written in the hope that it will be useful both to specialists in South African literature and to students wishing to extend their knowledge of Gordimer's writing, this introduction will end with a short biographical note on Gordimer, which may help to better understand her works in the context of her life as a writer and public intellectual.

A "Natural Writer": A Biographical Note about Gordimer

In an interview she gave in 1963, Gordimer remarked that she was a "natural writer,"[30] by which she meant that it was not the circumstances of her life that led her to become an author, but that she did so because of a natural inclination. While she may have "started from the inside,"[31] her work was shaped also by the outside: events on micro- and macroscale that affect every life in any historical period. Some of the events that influenced her life and her career as a writer and public intellectual will be mentioned in the following biographical note.

Nadine Gordimer was born on 20 November 1923 in Springs, South Africa. Her mother, Hannah Myers, came from a middle-class English family of Jewish origins which relocated to South Africa when she was six. Her father, Isidore, was born in a Jewish family in Lithuania but emigrated to South Africa at the age of thirteen to start a new life as a watchmaker. Nadine's early life was shaped by her proactive mother, who encouraged her daughter's participation in social and cultural events, for instance, the staging of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* in a black township (this experience inspired the story "The Amateurs" (*Common Sense* (8.12), 1947; *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952)). More importantly, it was Nan who introduced her daughter into the pleasures of reading by signing her into a local library. A catalyst to Gordimer's realization of social inequality, the library and the books it provided gave her

30 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 9.

31 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 9.

a glimpse into a world apart from the white community inhabiting her town. As Stephen Clingman writes, "*reading* was Gordimer's first transgression"[32] and a break from the insular colonial world of white South Africans in the 1940s and the 1950s. If reading was a transgression, it was one that took place within a wider postcolonial context of the British Commonwealth. An important influence in her early career, E. M. Forster introduced her to what she called "the British liberal tradition of that era,"[33] shaping her political convictions in the 1950s and the early 1960s. While writers like E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Somerset Maugham, and D. H. Lawrence certainly had an important influence on Gordimer, her reading was by no means confined to English literature. Among the writers who inspired her in her early career, she enumerated Anton Chekhov and Marcel Proust, both of whom she read throughout her life, as well as such writers as Guy de Maupassant, Italo Svevo, O. Henry, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Upton Sinclair, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, W. B. Yeats, Rainer Maria Rilke, André Gide, Albert Camus, V. S. Naipaul, Saul Bellow, Muriel Spark, Günter Grass, and other authors.

For Gordimer, reading and writing always went hand in hand. Her first story, "The Quest for Seen Gold" (*Children's Sunday Express*, 13 June 1937), was followed in 1939 by "Come Again Tomorrow" (*The Forum*, 18 November 1939). Looking back on her publishing history, it is apparent that her involvement with the short story was intense especially in the first two decades of her writing career: from the late 1940s to the early 1970s she published collections at regular intervals of four to six years. A major breakthrough came in 1951, when her story "A Watcher of the Dead" (*Jewish Affairs*, (3.4), 1948; *The New Yorker*, 9 June 1951; *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952) was published by *The New Yorker*, starting a long and fruitful cooperation with this prestigious magazine. The stories that established her career as a writer, especially in the eyes of American and British readers, were included in *The Soft Voice of the Serpent and Other Stories* (1952), *Six Feet of the Country: Fifteen Short Stories* (1956), and *Friday's Footprint and Other Stories* (1960).

In her autobiographical essay "A Bolter and the Invincible Summer" (1963), Gordimer points to the direct link between writing and political consciousness. As she writes, "the 'problems' of my country did not set me writing; on

32 Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, ed. Stephen Clingman (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 4.

33 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 193.

the contrary, it was learning to write that sent me falling, falling through the surface of 'the South African way of life.'"[34] It is hardly surprising, then, that from the beginning of her career as a writer, she was active as a public intellectual. At the end of the 1950s, she delivered a lecture titled "1959: What is Apartheid?" at the Africa Seminar in Washington D.C. The first in the group of her non-fiction texts that explore the logic and functioning of apartheid and its impact on the South African population, the lecture was also one of the few in which she expressed her belief in liberal humanism.

By the early 1960s, Gordimer was an established writer both of stories and novels (her first two novels, *The Lying Days* and *A World of Strangers*, were published in 1953 and 1958, respectively), reconciling a career in writing with her life as a wife and a mother: after a short-lived marriage to Gerald Gavron, she married Reinhold Cassirer in 1954. The couple started a life in Johannesburg with their children: Pippa (Reinhold's daughter from his previous marriage), Oriane (Nadine's daughter from her marriage to Gerald Gavron), and their son Hugo.

In 1961 Gordimer was awarded the British W. H. Smith Literary Award for her fourth collection *Friday's Footprint and Other Stories* (1960), the first of the two prizes she received for her stories (The Thomas Pringle Award was awarded in 1969 in recognition of the short fiction published in South African magazines). In 1965 she published her fifth collection *Not for Publication and Other Stories.* As a renowned writer, she was invited to lecture at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Washington, D.C. in 1960, at Harvard University, and at Northwestern University in 1969. Her cooperation with American universities continued in the 1970s, specifically the University of Michigan (1970), Columbia University (1971), where she held the post of Appointed Adjunct Professor of Writing, and Barnard College (1975). It was in the 1970s when she began to be recognized mostly as a novelist, publishing three novels (*A Guest of Honour* (1971), *The Conservationist* (1974), and *Burger's Daughter* (1979)) and receiving several prestigious literary prizes both at home and abroad: the CNA Prizes (South Africa) for *A Guest of Honour* (1974) and *The Conservationist* (1976), the Booker Prize (Britain) for *The Conservationist* (1974), and the French Grand Aigle d'Or Prize. In 1975 she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and in 1979 she was appointed an Honorary Member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

34 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 26.

In the 1970s, as Gordimer concentrated on her novels, she wrote noticeably fewer stories. *Livingstone's Companions* (1971), published by Viking in the United States and by Jonathan Cape in Britain, remained the only regular collection, the other two—*Selected Stories* (1975) and *Some Monday for Sure* (1976)—being selections of stories published in the previous books. The 1970s was also a time of Gordimer's increased activity as a public intellectual and a vocal critic of apartheid. In a lecture titled "Speak Out: The Necessity for Protest," delivered at the University of Natal in 1971, she spoke about the general failure of belief in liberalism, the radicalization of the South African youth, and possible ways of responding to the social and political crisis in South Africa. She continued her critique of liberalism in "Letter from Johannesburg" (1976) and "What Being a South African Means to Me," a lecture given at the University of Cape Town in 1977.

The 1980s brought further honours, with two CNA Prizes for *Burger's Daughter* (1980) and *July's People* (1981). *A Soldier's Embrace*, the seventh collection of stories, was published in 1980 by Viking in the United States and Jonathan Cape in Britain (reprinted in 1982 by Penguin). In 1982 a selection titled *Six Feet of the Country: Fifteen Short Stories* was published by Viking and Penguin.[35] The stories included in this selection, spanning the years 1965 to 1980, were adapted for television and released as six one-hour films, which were screened in 1982 across Europe (Britain, West Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Holland, and Scandinavia), the United States, and—in 1983—in South Africa. The following year *Something Out There* (1984), the eighth collection of Gordimer's short fiction, was published in the United States, Britain, and South Africa. Among the awards and honours received were both those granted by South African institutions (the honorary doctorates of the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town (1986)), American (e.g., Modern Language Association Award (1982), honorary doctorates of Harvard University and Yale University). Honours and accolades came also from Europe, including the Scottish Arts Council Neil M. Gunn Fellowship (1981), the Italian Premio Malaparte Prize (1986), the German Nelly Sachs Prize (1986), and the honorary

35 It may be added that the reprints of Gordimer's short fiction were not confined to those—and other—cheap and widely available paperbacks: in 1986, Eurographica, a small publishing house located in Helsinki, released 100 copies of a signed limited edition of a selection containing just three stories from the 1984 collection *Something Out There*.

doctorate of the University of Leuven, Belgium (1981). In 1986 she was elected Vice President of P.E.N.

Among Gordimer's non-fiction texts, the two key ones are "Living in the Interregnum," James Lecture delivered at the New York Institute of the Humanities in 1982, and "The Essential Gesture," Tanner Lecture on Human Values given at the University of Michigan in 1984. A powerful expression of her commitment to the building of a shared, non-racialist future, both those lectures will be discussed at length in Chapter One.

In the 1990s Gordimer published three novels—*My Son's Story* (1990), *None to Accompany Me* (1994), *The House Gun* (1998)—and the volume *Jump and Other Stories* (1991). Her ninth collection, *Jump* was published in Britain by Bloomsbury and in South Africa by David Philip publishers. The same year Gordimer was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. The press release of the Swedish Academy concentrated on her novels, mentioning her stories in the last paragraph: "Compact and dense, they are extremely telling and show Gordimer at the height of her creative powers."[36] Highest honours followed: in 1991 she was made the Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres, while in 1992 she was elected the Vice President of COSAW (Congress of South African Writers). In 1992 Gordimer was granted honorary doctorates of the University of Durban-Westville (South Africa) and of Cambridge University (UK). In 1993 she was elected for the board of the Foundation of Arts and Culture proposed by the ANC's Department of Arts and Culture. Among other accolades was the fourth CNA Prize for her novel *My Son's Story*, published in 1990. In 1992, one year after the Nobel Prize in Literature, *Why Haven't You Written* was released, containing twenty-two stories published from 1950 to 1972.

Gordimer's lectures and essays in the 1990s describe the political and social situation in South Africa (for example, "How Shall We Look at Each Other Then?" (1990) and "Act Two: One Year Later" (1995)). Among the issues discussed are the HIV epidemic, unjust social and economic relations, labour unrest, and the problem of widespread crime and violence, but also such positive developments as the abolition of the death penalty, multiracial schools, and the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The late 1990s brought increased interest in political and social changes on a global scale. Such non-fiction texts as "Our Century" (1995), "Labour Well The Teeming Earth" (her

36 "Press release," the official website of the Nobel Prize, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1991/press-release/.

speech to the United Nations Development Programme in 1997), and "A Letter to Future Generations" (1999) look at the issues of rampant consumerism, global poverty, and environmental destruction. In 1998 Gordimer was made Ambassador of the United National Development Programme (UNDP).

In the new century, Gordimer published three novels: *The Pickup* (2001), *Get a Life* (2005), and *No Time Like the Present* (2012). The tenth collection titled *Loot and Other Stories* was published in 2003 by Bloomsbury in Britain and by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in the United States. This was followed four years later by her final, eleventh collection *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* (2007). So far, the most recent selection is *Life Times: Stories, 1952–2007*, which includes thirty-eight stories, including two most recent and previously unpublished. In 2011, one year before her death, Gordimer, together with Es'kia Mphahlele, was awarded one of South Africa's highest honours, the Order of the Southern Cross (silver medal).

Chapter One

"Not just a Flash-in-the-Pan": The Evolution of Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories

"Being Here": Gordimer's "Existential Position" as a Writer

"Being here: in a particular time and place. That is the existential position with particular implications for literature."[1] Gordimer's reflection on the existential position of the writer, taken from her Nobel Lecture "Writing and Being," sets the agenda for this chapter, whose aim is to describe how her sense of "being here" shaped the creative process. This means paying close attention to the ways in which her sense of positionality influenced her political convictions, which, in turn, shaped her views on literature and the role of the writer in society. The challenge inherent in the task of mapping Gordimer's development as an artist is not to glide over the word "being"; in other words, not to ignore the human dimension of her works in an attempt to appreciate their political message. Indeed, Gordimer's goal throughout her career was primarily to shed light on the condition of human existence in all its depth and complexity. It is this goal that informed her conception of writing as "an enactment of life."[2]

The aim of this chapter is to follow Gordimer's development as a writer and a public intellectual, starting from her beginnings as a published author, when her work was shaped by her cooperation with *The New Yorker*, through her middle period, characterized by her search for a more politically involved and inclusive conception of the short story, to her later works, which are more contemplative, personal, and poignant in mood but which do not omit the topic of politics. From the perspective of this book's structure, the goal of this

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1 Nadine Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History: Notes from Our Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 203.

2 Nadine Gordimer, *Writing and Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 18.

chapter is to provide a framework for the ones that follow. The argument proposed here, at its most general level, is that Gordimer's career was defined by her gradual but ultimately decisive rejection of liberal humanism and by her decision to embrace the identity of the artist as "an agent of change,"[3] whose role is to explore and scrutinize various subject positions—the states of "being here"—in a way that gives justice to the ambiguous beauty of human existence. As I emphasize throughout this book, Gordimer believed that it is only by conveying the experiential, dynamic, and ambiguous truth about human beings that her works will constitute an adequate response to the social and political changes in her country.

Gordimer's Literary Influences

In an interview given by Gordimer to Simon Stanford in 2005, Gordimer was asked at what point she realized that her white, middle-class background had given her an advantage over less privileged social groups. After mentioning the all-white convent school that she attended and her cinema outings on Friday—entertainment from which black South Africans were excluded—Gordimer observed that at the age of six she had been signed into the local library, which she continued to consider her "principle source of education."[4] She then went on to note that had she been a black child, she would not have had the opportunity to use the library, and so, in all likelihood, she would not have become a writer.

How avid a reader Gordimer was in childhood can be seen from the notebooks[5] that she kept, in which she recorded—in meticulous detail—the books she read, together with her impressions. Gordimer's autobiographical essays, such as "A Bolter and the Invincible Summer" (1963), as well as the numerous interviews she gave, are proof enough that she was ready to acknowledge the role of other writers in her artistic development. To give just one example, in a 1979 interview by Jannika Hurwitt she made the following comment:

3 Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places,* ed. Stephen Clingman (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 142.

4 Interview with Nadine Gordimer by Simon Stanford, 2005, the official website of the Nobel Prize, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1991/gordimer/interview/.

5 I am referring to the two notebooks titled "Books read in 1938." Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

"At different times in my life I've—liked is not the word—I've been psychologically *dependent* upon different writers."[6] As Gordimer added, her response to other writers was not a question of *liking* but of living in and through their works.

The list of writers that influenced Gordimer is long and includes such names as Anton Chekhov, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Thomas Mann, E. M. Forster, and others. While analysing those influences in detail is beyond the scope of this chapter, several names should be emphasized here. From Ronald Suresh Roberts's biography of Gordimer, we know that Gordimer looked upon Chekhov as one of the most important writers in her life and continued to read his stories, seeking the kind of moral integrity that she always perceived in his works.[7] In the 1980s, she wrote about his importance for all short story writers: "Those of us who write short stories—could we, if there had been no Chekhov? Without him, I believe the short story would have become an archaic form, like the epic of northern sagas and the praise song of African traditional societies."[8] Although Gordimer never devoted an essay to Chekhov, she was always outspoken about his importance to her. In her lecture "The Essential Gesture" (1984), she mentioned Chekhov when writing about truth as the ultimate goal of every writer. As she pointed out, the writer's essential gesture consists in "the *transformation of experience*,"[9] which is informed by the central value of truth and truthfulness. Quoting Chekhov, Gordimer noted that the essential gesture is "to describe a situation so truthfully… that the reader can no longer evade it."[10] This is "the integrity Chekhov demanded,"[11] which should be observed both by white and black writers.

While Chekhov was certainly an important figure for Gordimer insofar as she treated his artistic integrity as an example to be followed, Katherine

6 Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 146.

7 In a letter to Susan Sontag (22 August 1986), she wrote: "I have taken to reading a Chekhov story (from the Ecco Press's new complete set) to restore me before I sleep." Qtd. in Ronald Suresh Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen: A Biography of Nadine Gordimer* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2005), 459.

8 Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen*, 460.

9 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 298.

10 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 299.

11 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 299.

Mansfield was a writer to whom she could relate more directly. Early in her career, Gordimer was drawn to Mansfield not only because of the stylistic brilliance of her prose but also because she saw an essential similarity between herself as a white South African and Mansfield, who spent the first fifteen years of her life in colonial New Zealand:

> Here was a little girl living in New Zealand, and I think there were strong similarities—the whole colonial life based on an Anglo-Saxon cultural tie, even if you weren't English. Reality seemed always to be across the sea. But then one felt, right, you see you can write about this—what is happening in your own backyard. Now with me it's just a bigger backyard.[12]

It is important to add that despite Gordimer's awareness that "[her] own backyard" could be the foundation on which to build her fictional universe, the sense of marginality, often connected with social and intellectual inferiority, is strongly present in her works. One way in which Gordimer dealt with her colonial position was to turn it into a major theme in her early fiction. Her first collections include stories of immigrants leading their quiet lives on the margins of a society that neither rejects nor fully accepts them (examples of such stories include "The Defeated" (*The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952), "Charmed Lives" (*Harper's Bazaar*, February 1956; *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956), and "The White Goddess and the Mealie Question" (*Six Feet of the Country*, 1956)). Other stories often describe a sense of alienation, experienced either by exiled Europeans or South Africans who feel that they are living their lives on the cultural margins (see e.g., "Face from Atlantis" (*The Paris Review* (13), 1956; *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956) and "Native Country" (*Ladies' Home Journal*, February 1965 [as "The Proof of Love"]; *Not for Publication*, 1965)). An acute sense of marginality is also felt by white South Africans who were raised with the awareness of Europe (notably England) being the cultural capital of the world ("Face from Atlantis"). The opposition may not involve England or Europe at all; in some stories, young colonial South Africans are driven by the need to dissociate themselves from their provincial surroundings—shake the dust from their feet, as it were—and seek an unspecified place (not necessarily outside of South Africa) as far away from their family as possible (see e.g., "The

12 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 61.

Umbilical Cord" (*The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952) and, more importantly, the autobiographical story "Charmed Lives" (*Harper's Bazaar*, February 1956; *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956)).

As was the case with Chekhov and Mansfield, Gordimer read Hemingway throughout her life and did not hide his importance to her as a writer. In an article entitled "Hemingway's Expatriates," she makes the following comment about the early stages of her development as a writer:

> From Ernest Hemingway's stories I learned to listen, within myself, when writing, for what went *unsaid* by my characters; what can be, must be conveyed in other ways, and not alone by body-language but also in the breathing spaces of syntax: the necessity to create silences which the reader can interpret from these signs.[13]

Gordimer goes on to discuss Hemingway's "use of repetition"[14] as a tool for marking emphasis in the text of the story. She points out that "a short story succeeds, if it does, as a series or play of echoes."[15] While the silences in the story may take the shape of a subconscious language of gestures, the silent (suppressed) message also finds its expression in the language—"the breathing spaces of syntax"—used by the narrators, characters, and character-focalizers. These silences in Gordimer's stories emphasize what goes unsaid between characters in terms of politics and sex[16]: two themes which are often inextricably connected both in her stories and in her novels.

As was the case with her attitude to Katherine Mansfield, Gordimer was drawn to Ernest Hemingway also because she found similarities between her own provincial background as an inhabitant of a small gold-mining town in South Africa and Hemingway's place of origin in the American Middle West.

13 Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times: Writing and Living, 1954–2008* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 565.

14 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 565.

15 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 566.

16 In the autobiographical essay "A Bolter and the Invincible Summer," she admits that the stories she wrote for political and literary magazines were "too long, or too outspoken (not always in the sexual sense)." She then adds: "In a fumbling way that sometimes slid home in an unexpected strike, I was looking for what people meant but didn't say, not only about sex, but also about politics and their relationship with the black people among whom we lived as people live in a forest among trees." Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 25–26.

The similarity, Gordimer adds, lies in the fact that while her home town was "shallowly occupied"[17] by white South Africans and by a vast majority of indigenous Africans, Hemingway's city—or rather the suburb in which he was born—was dominated by indigenous American Indians. From those backgrounds Hemingway and Gordimer departed in different ways: while Hemingway chose the life of an expatriate, Gordimer decided to involve herself both politically and artistically in the life of her country, which always meant entering into the life of people inhabiting Africa in at least two ways: through creative imagination and political action. This emphasis on knowing the country through its people is present in her article, especially in the passage in which she discusses Hemingway's story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" in the context of his fascination with Africa. Hemingway, insists Gordimer, was in love with Africa, but this love led him to shape his perception of this continent chiefly in accordance with his wishes and desires: "I hope I won't offend with heresy when I say that Hemingway never had both feet down on Africa. Never really was in Africa. For a country is its people; Africa is its people."[18] In short, Hemingway's flawed relationship with Africa is that he failed to respond to the reality of the people inhabiting it.

Leaving aside the question of whether Gordimer's commentary on Hemingway's treatment of Africa is justified or not, her article provides valuable insight into her own approach to writing. Rita Barnard rightly maintains that Gordimer "defines by negation . . . the version of modernism that she herself practices, based not on techniques learned and adopted but on the fullest possible responsiveness to the distinctive local experiences within the framework of an uneven colonial modernity."[19] In Barnard's view, Gordimer's preoccupation with such major modernists as Hemingway and Proust manifested itself in her adoption of open-ended narrative structures and "a refusal of narrative foreclosure."[20] Barnard goes on to argue that Gordimer's gesture of resisting closure conveys her stance of anticipation towards a new social, political, and

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17 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 564.

18 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 571.

19 Rita Barnard, "Locating Gordimer," in *Modernism, Postcolonialism, and Globalism: Anglophone Literature, 1950 to the Present*, ed. Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 102.

20 Barnard, "Locating Gordimer," 105.

cultural order waiting to be born—"an assent to the unforeseen, the emergent."[21] Barnard's compelling argument, which she illustrates in her discussion of the story "No Place Like" and the novel *The Conservationist*, should be qualified by the more cautious statement that while Gordimer was indeed anticipating—at least from the mid-1960s—major changes in her country, she was also increasingly unsure, apprehensive even, if she and other white South Africans would find their place in the changed situation. While this argument will be discussed at length in Chapter Three, what is important now is Barnard's comment on Gordimer's modernism, which she calls "a situated postcolonial modernism"[22]—"situated" insofar as it is rooted in Gordimer's response to a particular place and the people inhabiting it. As it is evident from the beginning of this chapter, Gordimer herself put much emphasis on her situatedness, doing so not only in the context of place but also of time.

When considering the influence of those and other writers on Gordimer, it is worthwhile to keep in mind that it was also through reading that her political consciousness was born. Pointing to the influence that Franz Kafka had on her, she wrote in 1963: "And 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.'"[23] This close relation between literature and politics in Gordimer's prose will be emphasized in the subchapters that follow.

The Short Story in the 1950s: Literary Realism and African Modernism

When Gordimer entered the literary scene in 1949 with the publication of her first collection titled *Face to Face*, she did so at a time when the short story as a literary form was about to rise in popularity. The 1950s in South Africa was a decade when stories were regularly published by various magazines and widely read both at home (in the 1950s, television had not yet been introduced) and in schools (many of the stories were anthologized[24]). The predominant literary

21 Barnard, "Locating Gordimer," 105.

22 Barnard, "Locating Gordimer," 100–101.

23 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 26.

24 Dorothy Driver, "The Fabulous Fifties," in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, ed. David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 387.

mode of the 1950s was realism, which was informed by the belief that one of the main goals of literature was to bear witness to reality and voice protest against social and political injustices. Later in the decade, this belief was famously criticized by Lewis Nkosi, who referred to black writing as "journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature."[25] As a reaction against this reductive deployment of literary realism, Nkosi and Es'kia Mphahlele developed what Dorothy Driver calls "ironic ambiguity,"[26] which led to a time of "short-lived"[27] "African modernism."[28] Driver adds that while the turn towards self-conscious irony was soon stifled by censorship and ideological changes, as writers (especially those identifying with the Black Consciousness Movement) turned to social realism and naturalism, nonetheless the 1950s was a formative time in the careers of such writers as Nadine Gordimer and Dan Jacobson: "For Gordimer and Jacobson, the deft, ironic, tonal play driving, especially, their short fiction was part of what accounted for the flourishing of their literary careers."[29] As Driver observes, Gordimer, Jacobson, and Jack Cope were the three leading short story writers in South Africa in the 1950s.[30] The three authors published their work mostly in prestigious magazines, whose target readers were international (mostly American) audience. What united them was their attempt to convey the marginalized voice of the Africans and describe a world which, as Jacobson said, seems "never to have been described at all."[31]

Gordimer saw in her writing an affinity with Jacobson's oeuvre. In an interview conducted in 1970, looking back at the writers of the post-war generation, such as herself, she first referred to Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1949) as perhaps the most well-known representative of "a new wave of

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25 Qtd. in Driver, "The Fabulous Fifties," 388.

26 Driver, "The Fabulous Fifties," 388.

27 Driver, "The Fabulous Fifties," 389.

28 Driver, "The Fabulous Fifties," 389.

29 Driver, "The Fabulous Fifties," 389.

30 A similar commentary can be found in Michael Chapman's study of southern African literatures. Writing about the 1950s and the 1960s, Chapman describes "the short story as the most popular and prolific form of imaginative writing in South Africa." He adds: "One of the leading practitioners was Gordimer who, in a similar vein to Dan Jacobson, Jack Cope, and, in Rhodesia, Doris Lessing, moved the story away from the colonial adventure yarn and the anecdotal regional tale to a sophisticated art of implication." Michael Chapman, *Southern African Literatures* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2003), 237.

31 Driver, "The Fabulous Fifties," 391.

writers"[32] and then went on to mention Dan Jacobson: "He wrote about rural communities. I wrote about life on the gold mines with their small closed-off white communities and the hundreds of thousands of Africans coming to labor there."[33] Gordimer saw herself and Jacobson as sharing the sense of addressing topics of marginal importance to the world, yet crucial to themselves as South African writers. The belief that post-war writers, both white and black,[34] were charting new territories in South African literature must have given the young authors the motivation, as well as the creative power, to explore topics connected with their historical position as liberals in apartheid South Africa. In Gordimer's case, the ultimate goal was to shed light on the social and political situation in her country and, in this way, to contribute to a better understanding between the races.

The Late 1940s and the 1950s: Beginnings as a Published Writer

From the beginning of her literary career, Gordimer was seen as a talented and innovative writer. In a five-page Foreword to her first collection, *Face to Face* (1949), published by the South African company Silver Leaf Books, she is presented as "a new name in the South African literary world."[35] Her stories are praised for their rootedness in her home country and for their quality of being "universal,"[36] the latter feature no doubt a recommendation to readers outside of South Africa. The author of the Foreword also points out that Gordimer's

32 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 51.

33 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 51. Gordimer might have had in mind Jacobson's early novels. His collections of short stories prove that he did not confine himself to the description of rural communities but also wrote about racial divisions in cities. In their emphasis on cities and small towns, Gordimer and Jacobson were representative of the changes in South African literature. As Dorothy Driver writes, "What primarily distinguished the fifties' fiction from that of earlier decades was the move from "the countryside – the land or farm as home base, or the veld as the site of romance—to the city or small town." Dorothy Driver, "The Fabulous Fifties," 391.

34 Among the group of white writers, Gordimer enumerated herself, Jacobson, Jack Cope, Jan Rabie, and Athol Fugard. The black writers she mentioned were Ezekiel Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane, and Todd Matshikiza. She added: "Actually, although I speak of these two groups separately, we all knew each other, and, in a sense, our work was complementary." Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 51.

35 Nadine Gordimer, *Face to Face* (Johannesburg: Silver Leaf Books, 1949), 4.

36 Gordimer, *Face to Face*, 4.

writing bears a resemblance to that of Virginia Woolf, Eudora Welty, Sarah Gertrude Millin, and, most importantly, Katherine Mansfield. In the editor's opinion, what Gordimer shares with Mansfield is "her extraordinary gift of revealing truths through trifles"[37] and bringing to the reader's attention the "hidden truths" underlying the everyday lives of her protagonists.

Face to Face was printed in a run of 2,000 copies. As Gordimer assured her London agent Gerald Pollinger, the collection received "really brilliant press" and "sold well, considering the small white population."[38] The next objective was to publish *Face to Face* in the United States and to that end, she sent the collection to Maurice Crain, Alan Paton's American agent, who, in turn, submitted it to Charles Scribner's Sons. Both Crain and John Wheelock of Charles Scribner's expressed admiration for Gordimer's works, the former adding that that the reason why they decided to reject the manuscript was that it was customary either to publish a short story collection after a novel, or—in the case of short story writers—to wait until the author has published a series of stories in American magazines. Gordimer took these as words of encouragement and went on to produce her first novel while at the same time submitting her stories to various magazines through the New York-based Sidney Satenstein agency.

The correspondence between Gordimer and Edith Brett of Sidney Satenstein began in early 1950. Gordimer submitted four stories: "The Catch" (*Virginia Quarterly Review* (27.3), 1951; *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952), "The Peace of Respectability" (*The Yale Review* (40.2), 1950; *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952 [as "The Hour and the Years"]), "Sweet Dreams Selection" (*Common Sense* (10.11), 1949), and "A Watcher of the Dead" (*Jewish Affairs*, (3.4), 1948; *The New Yorker*, 9 June 1951; *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952)), which were then sent to various magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *The Atlantic*, *Yale Review*, and others. A record of stories sent to Gordimer by Brett in May 1950 shows a consistent series of rejections, but September 1950 brought good news: "A Watcher of the Dead" was tentatively accepted by *The New Yorker*. Brett sent the news first by telegram and then in a longer letter, in which she added that the publication would be contingent upon Gordimer accepting any changes to the text proposed by the magazine editors. After assuring the young writer that the payment for the story would

37 Gordimer, *Face to Face*, 5.

38 Nadine Gordimer to Gerald Pollinger, undated letter. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

surely be high, Brett encouraged her not to bide her time but to send any new stories to *The New Yorker.*

The cooperation with *The New Yorker* began in October 1950 and lasted for many years to come, but it turned out to be not as smooth and easy as Brett and Gordimer may have been hoping for: having flourished in the 1950s and continued well in the 1960s, from the 1970s onwards her collaboration with the magazine was minor. This tendency is visible not only in the exchange between Gordimer and her editors (to be discussed later in this chapter) but also in the bare statistics: while in the 1950s she sold fifteen stories to *The New Yorker*, the number fell to seven in the 1960s, two in the 1970s, then rose to three in the 1980s, four in the 1990s, and again fell to three in the 2000s.

The correspondence between Gordimer and her first *New Yorker* editor, Katharine White, is a record of initial close cooperation based on a shared understanding of what constitutes a successful short story. The first stories sent to *The New Yorker* show Gordimer finding her own voice within the evolving style of this magazine: the "carefully wrought, many-comma'd prose,"[39] "a suggestion of feeling without the naming of it,"[40] and the "rejection of neatly tied-up endings."[41] Some of the stories were thematically not far from what *The New Yorker* published at the time, with "its well-educated white characters, who could be found experiencing the melancholies of affluence, the doldrums of suburban marriage, or the thrill or the desolation of adultery,"[42] but it should be added that Gordimer's first story published in the magazine, "A Watcher of the Dead" (*Jewish Affairs*, (3.4), 1948; *The New Yorker*, 9 June 1951; *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952), is far removed from such topics insofar as it describes the Jewish ritual of *shemira*, or guarding over the body of a deceased person.[43]

"A Watcher of the Dead" went through a series of revisions before being published almost a year after its submission. Gordimer's literary agent was right in predicting a generous payment for the story: in January 1951, she received

39 Jonathan Franzen, "The Birth of 'The New Yorker Story,'" *The New Yorker*, October 27, 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-birth-of-the-new-yorker-story.

40 Franzen, "The Birth of 'The New Yorker Story.'"

41 Franzen, "The Birth of 'The New Yorker Story.'"

42 Franzen, "The Birth of 'The New Yorker Story.'"

43 "A Watcher of the Dead" will be discussed at length in Chapter Four.

a cheque for $480[44] (minus $144 tax), arguably the highest in her career so far.[45] Five months later, "A Watcher of the Dead" appeared in *The New Yorker* on 9 June 1951 as one of two texts in the fiction section of the magazine (the other being a short piece by a regular *New Yorker* contributor Geoffrey T. Hellman). The story is squeezed between advertisements for bourbon, cufflinks, furniture, portable umbrellas, silk robes, and other luxurious goods. Looking at those pages—and at the whole magazine for that matter—provides an interesting insight into American post-war consumerism, but this is not the reason why *The New Yorker* edition has been mentioned here. Juxtaposing *The New Yorker* edition and the book version of "A Watcher of the Dead" (as later published in *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*), one may fully understand what Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russel meant when writing about the short story as a literary form that is "on the one hand, a visibly commercial product residing in popular magazines and subliterary genres, and on the other hand, an artistic medium praised by writers for its technical difficulty and associated with small-press, avant-garde or counter-cultural titles."[46]

The duality of the short story comes to mind whenever one is confronted with the 34 pieces that Gordimer published in *The New Yorker*, and this is so not only due to their layout but also because of how they have been edited. To fully appreciate this argument, one has to keep in mind an important fact: while Gordimer worked closely with *New Yorker* editors on the various revisions of her short stories and was ready to compromise to have them published in magazine form, she went back to the original version of her works when compiling collections ("A Watcher of the Dead" is an exception insofar as *The New Yorker* and book versions are almost exactly the same). Comparing each of the two versions and reading Gordimer's correspondence with her editors, one can see the extent to which publishing a short story was based on the art of the compromise, the two sides confidently setting forth their arguments, suggesting which points they are willing to concede to the other party and which they deem important enough to defend. One clear tendency that can be observed in the Gordimer–*New Yorker* correspondence from the early

44 Tax deducted, the cheque would amount to around $3,300 in 2020.

45 To compare, one year before Gordimer sold her story "The Hour and the Years" to the Yale Review for $75.

46 Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russel, eds., *The Postcolonial Short Story: Contemporary Essays* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4.

1950s to the late 1970s is Gordimer's growing confidence in her writing and—by the middle 1960s—the sense that she is moving away from *The New Yorker*'s conception of the short story as an elegant, minimalist, evocative, open-ended, and politically neutral[47] exploration of human relationships. In the early 1950s, however, her relationship with *The New Yorker* showed promise and so too did the relationship with Simon and Schuster, her American publisher.

The 1950s: Working with Editors

The Soft Voice of the Serpent, based largely on her previous collection *Face to Face*,[48] was published by Simon and Schuster on 23 May 1952. The cooperation with this publisher, smooth at first, ran into problems when, following the success of *The Lying Days*, Gordimer announced that her next book would be a collection of stories. Lee Wright responded with the argument that after reading *The Lying Days*, the audience would be reluctant to be presented with short fiction, to which Gordimer gave the following reply: "It's my stories surely, that—so far—have shown that I'm not just a flash-in-the-pan, and my stories that prove that, as a writer, I'm not dependent on the current wild interest in Africa for my themes."[49] This passage is important insofar as it shows that at the beginning of her writing career Gordimer's confidence rested in her achievements as a short story writer, and this was so not only because she had proven that she was able to sell her texts to prestigious magazines but also because

47 By politically neutral I mean not conveying the author's political sentiments in an overt way.

48 Lee Wright of Simon and Schuster proposed to omit five stories submitted by Gordimer, three of which had earlier been published in *Face to Face*: "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?", which was ultimately included in *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, "The Last of the Old-Fashioned Girls," and "Old Times' Sake." Wright also wanted to leave out two new stories submitted by Gordimer: "The Defeated" (which was ultimately included in *The Serpent* at Gordimer's request) and "Sweet Dreams Selection" (not included in *Face to Face*, the latter story remains unpublished). Gordimer herself eliminated three stories originally published in *Face to Face*: "The Battlefield at No. 29," "The Last of the Old-Fashioned Girls," and "No Luck To-Night." Apart from "The Defeated," the following new stories were published in *The Serpent*: "The Catch," "The Hour and the Years," "A Watcher of the Dead," "Treasures of the Sea," "The Prisoner," "Another Part of the Sky," and "The End of the Tunnel." All of these stories had earlier been published in various magazines, among them *Harper's Magazine*, *The Yale Review*, *The Virginia Quarterly*, and, of course, *The New Yorker*.

49 Nadine Gordimer to Lee Wright, 10 August 1955. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

she had shown that she was not limited by a subject which was contingent upon historical circumstances and her readers' changing interests.

After reluctantly accepting the stories later included in *Six Feet of the Country*, Simon and Schuster decided to defer the publication of the volume until January or February 1957. Gordimer's reaction was to flatly reject this decision. In a letter to her American agent, Sidney Satenstein, she wrote: "I shall always be a writer of short stories as well as of novels, and a publisher who is not prepared to treat whatever I write with equal interest is no use to me."[50] It was only after she had threatened to annul her contract with Simon and Schuster that they decided to comply with her request and have the book published in the autumn of 1956.

Gordimer's correspondence with Lee Wright of Simon and Schuster just before they decided to end their cooperation is instructive insofar as it demonstrates her conception of the relationship between the writer and the editor, and, more generally, her attitude towards editing her stories. On learning about Wright's decision to hand over the editorship of her fiction to Jack Goodman, the executive editor of Simon and Schuster, Gordimer first thanked Wright for their close cooperation on *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* and *The Lying Days*, after which she wrote: "You know that I feared the whole idea of being 'edited' at all. Probably I'm very wrong, but I've always believed that there's not much to be done about a book that the author can't fix (or rather shouldn't be able to see needs fixing) for himself."[51] She then went on to add that what she had failed to understand at the beginning of her career was that a good editor—like Wright—had a significant role to play both in the writing and the editing process: the editor gives the author much-needed support in the creative process, and, equally importantly, the editor considers the submitted text in the wider context of the author's previous works. Interestingly, after this explanation, Gordimer came back to her previous point, this time formulating her comment not in the past but in the present tense: "Perhaps I am arrogant about the inevitability of my literary mistakes, about this feeling I have that nobody can

50 Nadine Gordimer to Sidney Satenstein 17 May 1956. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

51 Nadine Gordimer to Lee Wright, 10 August 1955. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

make my books any better than I can once I've done my very imperfect best."[52] This view would remain unchanged throughout her life, and the best proof of this is the fact that Gordimer always preferred to see her stories printed with a minimum of editorial intervention. The only time when she gave her editor the freedom to change her stories in a more-than-minimal degree was at the very beginning of her career. Indeed, Gordimer's comment on the importance of a good editor, though intended to describe her cooperation with Lee Wright, more accurately reflects her work with Katharine White, her first *New Yorker* editor. A short overview of Gordimer's relationship with White, as well as Roger Angell, who worked with Gordimer after White, will be useful, first of all, because it will point to the aesthetic shortcomings of Gordimer's earlier fiction and, secondly, because it will illustrate her development as a writer of short stories.

From 1952 to 1965: Working with *The New Yorker*

Gordimer's undeniable genius notwithstanding, one important reason why she sold fifteen stories to *The New Yorker* in the 1950s was her fruitful cooperation with Katharine White. From 1952 to 1956 White remained Gordimer's chief *New Yorker* editor and was arguably her most attentive and sensitive reader. The first story edited by White was "A Bit of Young Life" (*The New Yorker*, 29 November 1952; *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956), the second to be accepted by the magazine. In her letter, White pointed out that while this story would need less editing than "A Watcher of the Dead," there were several issues which needed addressing. Two of the revisions that White proposed were purely technical, for example, adding a reference to make it clear that the setting is South Africa. One comment, however, is worth quoting here since it points to an imperfection visible both in Gordimer's unpublished stories and, to a lesser extent, in those that were published. At the end of her letter White—subtly, as always—criticized the passages that showed the effects of overwriting, noticing that such fragments would have to be rewritten ("tone[d] down"[53]) if the story was to be published. White's comment refers to the similes—the young

52 Nadine Gordimer to Lee Wright, 10 August 1955. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

53 Katharine White to Nadine Gordimer, 25 July 1952. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

author's favourite figure of speech—which, in some cases, added to the already considerable length of her sentences and thus slowed down the pace of reading. White's editorial work on "A Bit of Young Life" and the works that followed involved the pruning not only of comparisons but also of rhetorical questions and narratorial reflections. In the many cases where White intervened in this way, the story does indeed read better.

Equally instructive are the reasons White (and then Roger Angell) gave for rejecting Gordimer's texts. In total, thirteen pieces were rejected in the 1950s. Among the various reasons were the already mentioned tendency towards overwriting, as well as a lack of clarity as to the shifting narrative perspective in "The Cicatrice" (*Harper's Magazine*, March 1956 [published as "The Scar"]; *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956), the failure to carry out a surprise ending in "The White Goddess and the Mealie Question" (*Six Feet of the Country*, 1956), dullness and a failure to appeal to the reader's emotions in "Check Yes or No" (*Mademoiselle*, June 1957; *Friday's Footprint*, 1960), and a lack of clarity at the end of "A Thing of the Past" (*Encounter* (13.3), 1959; *Friday's Footprint*, 1960). The editors also pointed to Gordimer's purported failure to characterise her protagonists in such a way as to make them interesting and convincing enough to appeal to the reader (this latter criticism was directed at the following stories: "Horn of Plenty" (*Six Feet of the Country*, 1956), "Happy Event" (*The Forum* (1.11), 1953; *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956), "The Last Kiss" (*The London Magazine* (4.2), 1957; *Friday's Footprint*, 1960), and "Neighbours and Friends" (*Cosmopolitan*, August 1960)). White and Angell also criticised Gordimer for the use of first-person male narration in such stories as "Neighbours and Friends" (*Cosmopolitan*, August 1960), "One Whole Year and Even More" (*The Kenyon Review* (26.1), 1964; *Not for Publication*, 1965), "Some Monday for Sure" (*Transition* (4.18), 1965; *Not for Publication*, 1965), and "My First Two Women" (*Six Feet of the Country*, 1956), although this last was ultimately published in *The New Yorker* as "The Pretender" (24 March 1956) after substantial changes.[54] Commenting on those stories, the editors often claimed either that such a narrative perspective was unconvincing because of too much time devoted to the description of emotions or that she had unwittingly constricted her freedom to write about emotions (in both cases the implication being that for male narrators to be convincing, they cannot come across as particularly emotionally literate).

54 Gordimer changed the gender of the narrator at the request of Katharine White. The story will be discussed in Chapter Six.

It is worthwhile to dwell for a little longer on what appears to be the mantra of *New Yorker*'s editors—namely, their conviction that the fictional protagonists in a short story should be well-characterised (in the sense that no major information about them should be withheld from the reader) and—equally importantly—engaging enough to appeal to the reader's emotions. The former requirement brings us to the interesting issue of names in Gordimer's stories. It is a characteristic feature of Gordimer's unedited stories that the protagonists are first referred to by personal pronouns and only then—if ever—are they given names. While this strategy was never a controversial issue between Gordimer and her editors, it is a fact that first Katharine White and then Roger Angell insisted that when a protagonist, central or minor, appeared for the first time, he or she should be given a name and be referred to by that name consistently throughout the story, especially when there was a risk of confusing one character with another. In the case of those stories that describe the meetings of several characters (parties, dinners, family gatherings, etc.), the editors had a difficult time distinguishing one character from another and making sure that their readers would not have to grapple with the same problem. Here, as with many other changes, the editors' priority was to ensure that no crucial information was withheld from the readers.

While Gordimer agreed to supply the missing names for the magazine editions of her stories (here I mean specifically *The New Yorker*), she came back to the original versions when she selected them for her books. In many of those book editions, the characters are either not given a name (this happens often—but not only—in the stories narrated in the first person) or they are named only at a later stage. Gordimer's strategy of confronting the reader with nameless or belatedly named protagonists throws the reader into the situation described and forces him or her to stay alert to the textual clues about the character—anything that may help in determining who that person may be. The scarcity of names in the book version of her stories is also what occasionally motivates the readers to return to a given scene to ensure that they have attributed the right words to the right person. Following dialogues presents a similar challenge, as Gordimer often chose to quicken the pace of narration by constructing short exchanges, leaving the readers with the task of ascertaining who said what (this is the case in "The Smell of Death and Flowers" (*The New Yorker*, 15 May 1954; *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956), which will be discussed in Chapter Three).

The corrections made by *New Yorker* editors were not confined to attributing words to characters or supplying dialogue tags—in the case of some stories, the changes were more structural. Both White and Angell favoured a tripartite structure of the short story: an introductory section, in which the situation is clearly outlined and in which the problem (for example, a conflict in the family) is signalled; the middle section, in which this problem comes to the full realization of the protagonists; and a final section, in which a conclusion of some sort is offered, most often by making clear how the problem has affected the characters and the relationships between them. The priority for White and Angell was clarity of focus from the very beginning of the story, so that the reader would not be forced to return to certain passages, looking for the clues they may have missed on the first reading.

Gordimer's cooperation with *The New Yorker* had an unquestionable influence on her development in the 1950s since it helped to forge her own understanding of the short story as one whose role is to explore the nuances of the individual psyche and the intricacies of human relationships, often in the setting of a white, middle-class home. The extent to which this notion of the short story influenced Gordimer can be seen in her essay "The Short Story in South Africa," originally published in *The Kenyon Review* in 1968. It is worthwhile to pause at this stage and—taking this essay as a starting point—formulate more general comments about Gordimer's evolution as a writer.

The Late 1960s: "The Short Story in South Africa"

Gordimer begins "The Short Story in South Africa" by observing that the tasks of the novelist and the short story writer are completely dissimilar insofar as the former has less freedom than the latter. While the novelist creates characters whose thoughts and behaviour have to be consistent over time, the short story writer has no such limitations:

> Each of us has a thousand lives and a novel gives a character only one. *For the sake of the form.* The novelist may juggle about with chronology and throw narrative overboard; all the time his characters have the reader by the hand, there is a consistency of relationship throughout the experience that cannot and does not convey the quality of human life, where contact is more like the flash of fireflies, in and out, now

> here, now there, in darkness. Short-story writers see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of—the present moment. Ideally, they have learned to do without explanation of what went before, and what happens beyond this point. How the characters will appear, think, behave, comprehend, tomorrow or at any other time in their lives, is irrelevant. A discrete moment of truth is aimed at—not *the* moment of truth, because the short story doesn't deal in cumulatives.[55]

According to Gordimer, the concentration on the present moment is liberating because it does not force the writer to construct a continuous narrative for the character. This difference between the short story and the novel is connected with what she describes as "consistency of relationship" between the writer and the reader. This aspect of the writer-reader relation is a given; in other words, it is an attribute of the novel that cannot be changed, even in the case of an experimental treatment of chronology. Any sustained relationship—argues Gordimer—raises the expectation of consistency in the reader (having some knowledge of the protagonist, the reader expects the character to think and act in a particular way), and the fracturing of this consistency is perceived as a flaw in the construction of the character; in other words, a failure of psychological insight on the part of the writer. In a short story, by contrast, the reader knows considerably less about the character, which, in turn, enables the writer to introduce an unexpected insight into her protagonist—a hidden desire, an unrevealed frustration, a truth suppressed—that points to the complexity of individual identity (as Gordimer points out in the essay, "each of us has a thousand lives."[56]).

Gordimer's essay can be described as impressionistic in its use of imagery (one is reminded of Virginia Woolf's "Modern Fiction"[57]) but at the same time

55 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 169–170.

56 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 169.

57 In the essay, Woolf praises James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses* in a language reminiscent of that used by Gordimer in her 1968 essay. Writing about Joyce, Woolf observes: "he is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain." Referring to the sixth episode of *Ulysses* ("the scene in the cemetery," as she describes it), she writes about "its brilliancy, its sordidity, its incoherence, its sudden lightning flashes of significance." Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006), 2090. Similarly to Woolf, Gordimer uses

it is precise in identifying the central issue, namely the short story's concentration on the present moment. In Gordimer's view, our understanding of the surrounding world and of the bonds we create with other people is both dynamic and intermittent—dynamic because it evolves over time, intermittent because we do not at every point of our life fully realize the nature of our relationships with other people and our place in society. This realization comes to us only during a brief moment of insight called "a discrete moment of truth."[58] Both in life and in literature a complete knowledge of the feelings and thoughts of the other person is impossible and only a momentary and fleeting understanding can be reached. This observation about the nature of understanding becomes the basis for a more general reflection on the short story:

> The short story is a *fragmented and restless form*, a matter of hit or miss, and it is perhaps for this reason that it suits modern consciousness—which seems best expressed as flashes of fearful insight alternating with near-hypnotic states of indifference.[59]

Gordimer argues that in contemporary society, which is characterised by the break-up of middle-class life (an argument that is mentioned but not pursued in the essay), the short story is likely to outlive the novel since the former is more adjusted to modern life, with its isolation, increasing competitiveness, and a shortage of time for the consumption of literary works.

Gordimer's argument about the popularity of short fiction is useful in that it sheds light on her perception of social changes, but it is less interesting than what she has to say about the nature of the short story as a "fragmented and restless form."[60] This idea is consistent with the view that modernist literature (not only the short story but also the novel and poetry) is critical of the notion of a unitary self. Charles Taylor in his seminal philosophical study *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* asserts that Modernism, similarly to Romanticism, can be considered a reaction against a mechanistic and

the imagery of sudden and intermittent lightness, understood as a momentary revelation of meaning, as experienced by the characters and perhaps also by the readers. This description is highly reminiscent of the notion of epiphany.

58 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 170.

59 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 170–171 (my emphasis).

60 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 171.

utilitarian image of man, as created by the European Enlightenment. Unlike Romanticism, writes Taylor, Modernism does not consider faith in nature and man's creative powers as stable sources of the self. On the contrary, the inward turn of the modernists led to what Taylor calls "a fragmentation of experience which calls our ordinary notions of identity into question."[61]

Embracing the notion of the short story as the search for the fleeting moment of truth, Gordimer set out to explore the fragmented and imperfect self-knowledge that people acquire in brief moments of sudden, epiphanic understanding. Her early fiction tends to concentrate on moments when the characters are made aware of thoughts, desires, motivations, or reactions that they would have never envisioned in themselves had they not been confronted with that unexpected situation. Among the stories structured in such a way as to have the moment of self-revelation at their centre are those published in her first collection *Face to Face* (e.g., "In the Beginning" and "The Kindest Thing To Do") and her second volume *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* (e.g., "The Hour and the Years," "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?", and "Another Part of the Sky"), but it should be added that this kind of story would go on to inspire Gordimer in the 1960s (a good example being "A Company of Laughing Faces," included in her 1965 collection *Not for Publication*).

Having found her unique voice in the modernist literary tradition, Gordimer soon started to search for a more inclusive form of short fiction—one that would both give insight into her characters' interiority and account for a wider socio-political context. This search led her to experiment with her works,

61 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 462. It is worth adding that reflections on the fragmentation of experience can also be found in discussions of modernist literature. Suzanne Ferguson in her article on the rise of the short story observes that "the preeminence of the short story as a modernist genre grew out of the modern, highbrow audience's acceptance of fragmentation as an accurate model of the world, with a concomitant focus on 'being'—as in Woolf's 'moments of being'—rather than the 'becoming' that characterizes the plot of the Romantic and the Victorian novel." Suzanne Ferguson, "The Rise of the Short Story in the Hierarchy of Genres," in *Short Story at a Crossroads*, ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 191. The fragmentation of experience is also addressed by Dominic Head in *The Modernist Short Story*. Writing about the tendency of modernist literature to foreground technique, he observes: "The artifice of the short story facilitates another modernist preoccupation: the analysis of personality, especially a consideration of the fragmented, dehumanized self." Dominic Head, *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 7–8.

which, as I will now show, resulted in significant differences between her and her *New Yorker* editor.

The Evolution of Gordimer's Stories in the 1960s

The 1960s was an important decade in Gordimer's development as a writer. To see the full extent of this creative evolution, we should go back to her early correspondence in which she juxtaposed her novels and short stories, suggesting that while she may have benefitted from "the current wild interest in Africa,"[62] her lasting achievement as a writer—the proof that she could not be viewed as "just a flash-in-the-pan"[63]—did not lie in her exploration of what she somewhat dismissively called "black and white and the race business."[64] While she did not finish this thought, it is safe to assume that in the middle of the 1950s Gordimer saw her short stories chiefly in terms of apolitical descriptions of her protagonists' private lives. By the mid-1960s, this conception of the short story had become obsolete, as she began to treat politics as a major force acting on people and, as such, a topic worthy of close and sustained attention.

Gordimer's changing conception of the short story is reflected in her correspondence with Roger Angell of *The New Yorker*. Before the mid-1960s her cooperation with this magazine was very successful: by 1962 she had published nineteen stories and was considered one of its most regular contributors. It was after 1962 that Gordimer met with a series of rejections which included "Not for Publication" (*Contrast* 12 (3.4); *The Atlantic*, April 1965 [as "Praise"]; *Not for Publication*, 1965), "Through Time and Distance" (*The Atlantic*, January 1962; *Not for Publication*, 1965), "Message in a Bottle" (*The Kenyon Review* (26.2), 1962; *Not for Publication*, 1965), "One Whole Year and Even More" (*The Kenyon Review* (26.1), 1964; *Not for Publication*, 1965), "Some Monday for Sure" (*Transition* (4.18) 1965; *Not for Publication*, 1965), and "Son-in-Law" (*The Reporter*, 11 March 1965; *Not for Publication*, 1965), most of which were criticised for their purported failure to provide a convincing and interesting portrait of her protagonists. Trying to

62 Nadine Gordimer to Lee Wright, 10 August 1955. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

63 Nadine Gordimer to Lee Wright, 10 August 1955. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

64 Nadine Gordimer to Lee Wright, 10 August 1955. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

account for the recent string of rejections, Angell sent Gordimer a long letter in which he described what he saw as a change for the worse in her writing. In this letter, dated March 1964, Angell suggested that this troubling trend could be attributed to her political involvement (characterised euphemistically as "your passionate concern for 'the problem,'"[65] meaning apartheid), which, he argued, had greatly influenced the way in which she described her protagonists: "Somehow, you seem less involved with your characters as individuals, and more aware of them as representatives of a group or social class or as figures in some larger contemporary drama."[66] Angell went on to add that if he was right in this judgment, then this new trend was "an entirely honourable error,"[67] which resulted from Gordimer's need to understand and convey to her readers the conflicts and dramas inherent in the lives shaped by apartheid. Importantly, Angell did not express concern with the recent shift of focus but rather with the resulting change of emphasis: the fact that the stories no longer concentrated on single scenes but were more epic in their scope. Concluding his argument, Angell referred to the earlier works, pointing to their ability to create meaning through subtle allusions and references.

Angell's reflection on Gordimer's increasingly politicized stance ("Your passionate concern for 'the problem'"[68]) is largely true in at least two respects. First of all, while it is a fact that apartheid had featured prominently in her prose from the beginning of her writing career, the mid-1960s was a time when politics became an important topic in her short fiction: as many as eight out of sixteen[69] stories included in her fifth collection *Not for Publication* (1965) are about apartheid. This should not come as a surprise, since by the late 1950s Gordimer began treating politics as a force that touched her directly. In a lecture delivered at Africa Seminar, Washington D.C., titled simply "1959: What is

65 Roger Angell to Nadine Gordimer, 23 March 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

66 Roger Angell to Nadine Gordimer, 23 March 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

67 Roger Angell to Nadine Gordimer, 23 March 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

68 Roger Angell to Nadine Gordimer, 23 March 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

69 While the Viking edition of *Not for Publication* includes 16 stories, Victor Gollancz published 15 stories in its volume. The additional story, available in the American edition, is "Something for the Time Being."

Apartheid?" she made the following observation: "My opposition to apartheid is compounded not only out of a sense of justice, but also out of a personal, selfish, and extreme distaste for having the choice of my friends dictated to me, and the range of human intercourse proscribed for me."[70]

Increased involvement with politics meant that Gordimer began to devote more attention to the topics that once occupied her, such as the effect of racial injustice on disadvantaged social groups and the ideological influence of apartheid on her characters. Moreover, by the middle of the 1960s, she made the politically important decision to write about the various ways in which the black and coloured population attempted to achieve agency in their lives by opposing the system of racial oppression. Among the stories that concentrate on the issue of opposition to apartheid are "Something for the Time Being" (*The New Yorker*, 9 January 1960; *Not for Publication*, 1965), "A Chip of Glass Ruby" (*Contrast* (1.1), 1960; *The Atlantic*, February 1961; *Not for Publication*, 1965), and "Some Monday for Sure" (*Transition* (4.18) 1965; *Not for Publication*, 1965),[71] all of which have at their centre black and coloured South Africans whose lives are shaped chiefly by their struggle against racial injustice. Such politically outspoken works met with a mixed reaction in *The New Yorker*: while some of them (like "Something for the Time Being") were accepted, others did not appeal to Angell and other *New Yorker* editors, who on the whole preferred a psychologically nuanced analysis of the effects of apartheid on the individual rather than stories about the birth of political awareness.

Gordimer's more politically committed conception of the short story was connected with a challenge that she faced from the 1960s. This challenge is described in the letter to Angell from 1 May 1965, in which she responded to his criticism. Thanking Angell for his comments and admitting that she was "upset" by the recent trend of rejections, she made the following candid comment on the influence of politics on her writing:

> if it is true that my increasing involvement with—not politics, but the things that politics do to people, in this country, has made me move from the individual to the representative, this is not an "entirely honourable

70 Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History*, 112.

71 The three mentioned stories are discussed at length in Chapter Three (see the section: The 1960s: "The Things Politics Do to People").

error" at all. In fact it is a betrayal of the only thing people like us can be sure of: the truth of our own talent.[72]

Gordimer's argument here is that the quality of writing lies in its insightfulness, in other words, its ability to convey the truth about life, including a given social and political reality. This comment leads us to the challenge that she faced in her creative endeavours: to describe the changing situation in her country but—in so doing—not to move from the individual to the representative; in other words, explore the political ("the things that politics do to people") without losing sight of the personal.

In a passage that immediately follows the comment on "the truth of our own talent," Gordimer added:

> I had hoped—and hope—to bring to people who could be dismissed as categorical 'victims', 'oppressors' etc., exactly the same scrupulously personal approach that I have always used for people whose labels are not so easily read—in fact, I have wanted to peel off the labels, as it were. And I have wanted to admit what lies underneath, even if this discovery should go against my own political sympathies and prejudices.[73]

She concluded her reflections by pointing out that if her recent shift of focus had indeed done harm to her stories, then she did not expect *The New Yorker* to give her the benefit of the doubt, since "it's inevitable that well-tried successes should be more acceptable than 'interesting' failures, so far as you're concerned."[74]

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72 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 1 May 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

73 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 1 May 1964, Gordimer mss. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

74 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 1 May 1964, Gordimer mss. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. This last comment is echoed in an interview Gordimer gave to Alan Ross of the *London Magazine* in 1965. In response to Ross's question about how she saw the stages of her cooperation with *The New Yorker*, Gordimer first gave a short overview of her career as a short story writer (her literary debut at age fifteen, her relationship with American magazines in the 1950s), and then she went on to mention her work and friendship with Katharine White. She denied ever writing short stories with the aim of publishing them in *The New Yorker*, a point which she had earlier reiterated to Angell. Gordimer then commented that while she saw no set "formula" for a *New Yorker* story, it

Gordimer's 1964 letter to Angell is significant insofar as it points to the trajectory of Gordimer's artistic development in later decades. Starting from her fifth collection (*Not for Publication*, 1965) and including her volumes published in the 1970s (*Livingstone's Companions*, 1971) and the 1980s (*A Soldier's Embrace*, 1980; *Something Out There*, 1984), politics emerges as a force that defines her protagonists in the sense of shaping their motivations. In the collections published from the late 1960s, Gordimer's protagonists are increasingly often presented in terms of how they respond to social and political events: whether or not they allow those circumstances to have an effect on their lives. As she became more politically outspoken, even those stories whose focus was unambiguously on the private lives of her characters—and she continued to write such stories throughout her life—began to have politics as a background but by no means an insignificant presence.

The increased emphasis on politics from the mid-1960s brought about an important change in Gordimer's career. Beginning with the stories published in those years, her non-white protagonists are no longer treated as a background against which white characters experience their doubts and crises. This does not necessarily mean that black and coloured South Africans invariably move to the foreground, although this tendency can be observed in Gordimer's writing, but it does mean that with time, they gain individuality and are given their own voice. This topic will be discussed at length in Chapter Two, whose subject is interracial relationships, and in Chapter Three, analysing the topic of social and political commitment.

The 1970s: Gordimer's Introduction to *Selected Stories* (1975)

In her 1964 letter to Roger Angell, discussed in the previous subchapter, Gordimer pointed out that her task was to write against calcified beliefs and—if needs be—also against her own loyalties. This latter observation would become the basis of Gordimer's conception of writing, which she expressed in her non-fiction texts published in the 1970s. To give one important example,

was true that the magazine expected its authors to continue writing the same kind of story that had made them popular in the first place: "They are not interested in growing pains over something new; but who wants to go on doing successfully what he can do with one hand tied behind his back?" Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 41.

in the introduction to her 1975 volume of *Selected Stories*, Gordimer makes the following comment:

> Powers of observation heightened beyond the normal imply extraordinary disinvolvement; or rather the double process, excessive preoccupation and identification with the lives of others, and at the same time a monstrous detachment. . . . The tension between standing apart and being fully involved; that is what makes a writer.[75]

The quoted passage, describing the tension that shapes the creative process, is significant insofar as Gordimer in her later non-fiction works frequently saw writing in the light of the two terms used by her: identification and detachment. She viewed identification in terms of her search for that which remains to be discovered under the surface of everyday existence: the complexity and ambiguity of human life. Detachment—or disinvolvement—was the crucial requirement for objectivity, which Gordimer considered the necessary stance of a politically committed writer.

It is worthwhile to add that the surface-depth metaphor to which I have just alluded shaped Gordimer's conception of writing: one of the first instances of its use can be found in her 1964 letter to Roger Angell (quoted in the previous section), in which she wrote about her goal "to peel off the labels" and "admit what lies underneath."[76] In her thinking, surface was connected with facts, while fiction conveyed human experience. To give one example, in an interview by Melvyn Bragg, published in 1976, Gordimer observed: "The facts are always less than what really happens. I mean the facts are just on the surface—it's what makes the fact."[77] She then went on to add that while relevant statistics could be provided on the functioning of apartheid laws in South Africa, this information would never convey their true impact on people. According to Gordimer, life exists under the surface of facts and it is life which is of primary interest to any writer of fiction.

In Gordimer's conception of writing, involvement, achieved through imagination and empathy, enables the writer to closely observe—and describe—the

75 Nadine Gordimer, *Selected Stories* (London: Cape, 1975), 11.

76 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 1 May 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana, University, Bloomington, Indiana.

77 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 76.

lives of others. Stephen Clingman in his classic study *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* writes about "the degree to which her novels maintain an extraordinarily close observation of the world in which she lives."[78] It is this quality of her writing, manifesting itself in a variety of ways (from details connected with her characters' behaviuor and the language they use, to social and political events), which can be seen as "a precondition of Gordimer's historical consciousness."[79] Clingman returns to this important point in an introduction to the collection of lectures, essays, and articles *The Essential Gesture*, in which he describes Gordimer as "an analytical thinker, looking at things, round them, viewing them from all angles," adding that "this flows in the first instance . . . from the closeness of her visual inspection."[80] Clingman's comparison of Gordimer to an analytical thinker is compelling, but we should keep in mind that her impulse was not so much to isolate and analyse—as the metaphor of analytical thinker may imply—but to convey the connectedness of things: the ways in which social and political events, people and the environment, emotions and other states of mind, coexist and interact with each other.

The other essential element that gives rise to the tension shaping the creative process is detachment, or "standing apart,"[81] as Gordimer described it in her introduction to *Selected Stories*. The notion of detachment became the basis for her understanding of the role of the writer as a public intellectual who distances herself from various political standpoints (including those with which she identifies or sympathizes) in order to explore and scrutinize them. To shed more light on Gordimer's conception of the writer, especially her insistence on detachment, it is worthwhile to mention her lecture at the Durban Indian Teachers' Conference (1975), in which she emphasized "the writer's freedom to reproduce truth and the reality of life even if this truth does not coincide with his own sympathies."[82] She made this comment in the context of Ivan Turgenev's belief in the writer's freedom to state the truth, even if doing so means writing against one's political allegiances. This belief, I would argue, is also a distinctive feature of Gordimer's writing, which characterizes

78 Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 7.

79 Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 8.

80 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 6.

81 Gordimer, *Selected Stories*, 11.

82 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 108.

all of her oeuvre. From the beginning of her career, she had the insight and the courage to distance herself from the values that shaped her milieu: first from the conservative sentiments that informed her social background, then from the liberal humanist convictions that she held in the 1950s and early 1960s. From the 1970s, Gordimer held firmly to the conviction that justice could only be achieved by profound social, political, and economic change. In her writing, she sought to examine the underlying complexity and dynamism of social attitudes, as embodied both by those strongly opposed to apartheid and those who, in various ways, resisted the process of transformation.

At the end of her introduction to *Selected Stories* (1975), after discussing the notions of identification and detachment, Gordimer goes on to formulate a definition of the short story. Approaching this task from the perspective of the writer, she argues that "a short story is a concept that the writer can 'hold,' fully realized, in his [the writer's] imagination, at one time."[83] Contrasting it with the novel, whose scope is too wide to envision as a single idea, Gordimer points out that the short story can present itself to the writer in its entirety ("a short story *occurs*, in the imaginative sense"). The choice concerning literary form is never made after reflecting on a given idea; rather, the idea is already recognised by the writer as one that may be realised as a short story or as part of a novel.[84] She concludes her reflections with the following powerful statement about the short story: "To write one is to express from a situation in the exterior or interior world the life-giving drop—sweat, tear, semen, saliva—that will spread an intensity on the page; burn a hole in it."[85]

Gordimer's writerly definition of the short story is worth considering insofar as it sheds light on her creative process. Of central importance here is her

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83 Gordimer, *Selected Stories*, 14.

84 The clear distinction between the novel and the short story that Gordimer draws when discussing the creative process does not mean that there was no crossing between the two. When writing many of her novels, Gordimer excerpted and edited the fragments that she felt could stand as a self-contained whole, which she then tried to sell to various magazines. Among those that were published are "Something Unexpected" (adapted from *Occasion for Loving* and published in *Cosmopolitan* in the early 1960s), "The Conservationist" (adapted from *The Conservationist* and published in *Playboy* in 1973), "Children with the House to Themselves" (adapted from *A Sport of Nature* and published in the *Paris Review* in 1986), "Benoni—Son of Sorrow" (adapted from *My Son's Story* and published in Prize Writing in 1988), and "Across the Veld" (adapted from *My Son's Story* and published in *Paris Review* in 1989).

85 Gordimer, *Selected Stories*, 14.

contention that a short story occurs to the writer as "a situation in the exterior or interior world," which is then transformed into writing in such a way as to convey its latent emotional intensity (the reference to "sweat, tear, semen, saliva" conveys Gordimer's preoccupation with such forces shaping human motivations as career, love, desire, loss, grief, etc.). The suggestion to consider "situation" as the key word in the passage is based on a close reading of the notebooks in which Gordimer wrote down ideas for many of her short stories. These brief entries—considerably shorter than the notes for her novels—are best characterised as sketches of certain situations, later to be expanded into stories. Irrespective of whether Gordimer's notes are brief and general (e.g., the ideas for "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off" or "Home") or filled with detail (e.g., her notes for "Comrades"), their aim is always to capture a situation with dramatic potential, which can then be elaborated into a story.

The Late 1970s and the 1980s: Gordimer's Conception of the Writer

The discussion of Gordimer's introduction to *Selected Stories* (1975), especially the comment on detachment as the essential stance of the writer, brings us to the topic of Gordimer's political views in the context of her approach to the situation in South Africa in the late 1970s. One text that reflects this attitude is "Relevance and Commitment," originally an address delivered at the University of Cape Town in 1979. Marking her decisive rejection of the doctrine of liberal humanism,[86] the lecture shows her acknowledgment of what Stephen Clingman aptly calls "the undeniable insights of Black Consciousness."[87] Indicative of this influence is her awareness of the distance dividing the black and white population of South Africa, leading to a deep sense of isolation. To overcome this isolation, the white writer, argued Gordimer, "has to admit

86 In this lecture, Gordimer spoke about the general loss of belief in liberal humanism as a viable standpoint for white writers in South Africa. Defining the liberal stance (or "liberal role," as she termed it)—after Nosipho Majeke—as "conciliator between oppressor and oppressed," she commented that this position was no longer seen as relevant. Gordimer referred to liberal humanism as "a false consciousness" and argued that if the white writer was to break out of "his double isolation," he had to acknowledge that his experience was completely different from that of his black compatriots. Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 138.

87 Clingman, Introduction to "Relevance and Commitment." Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 133.

openly the order of his experience as a white as differing completely from the order of black experience."[88] Gordimer insisted that recognising this social, political, and experiential difference was a starting point for those white writers who sought a place for themselves in the new post-apartheid reality. If they were to be accepted by their black compatriots, Gordimer noted, those authors would have to find their place in what she called "a real indigenous culture of the future"[89] by taking the role of "the artist as an agent of change, always moving towards truth, true consciousness."[90] Gordimer added that it was by no means a foregone conclusion that the white writers would find their place in post-apartheid South Africa; nevertheless, it was crucial that those writers should take the first step in this direction by scrutinising their social and political position in the country, specifically their privileged status. Gordimer's insistence on this necessary step was observed by commentators as early as in the 1980s and it continued to be emphasized by writers and critics alike. As Rita Barnard has suggested in a recent article,

> Gordimer was acutely sensitive to the privileges that enabled her to become a writer, wished to have them extended to others, and as the political struggle evolved, became more and more aware of the fact that her skills were not enough to guarantee or merit her inclusion in a new order.[91]

Despite this awareness, Gordimer made the politically and artistically consequential decision to embrace change, seeing this stance as a way of overcoming her isolation as a white writer in South Africa.

Gordimer's understanding of the artist as "an agent of change"[92] involved active participation in the social and political transformation of society. This involvement led to political commitment, which intensified in the 1980s. In an interview with Ruth Lazar, Gordimer pointed out that while in the 1970s she

88 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 139.

89 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 142.

90 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 142.

91 Barnard, "Locating Gordimer," 110–111.

92 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 142.

had felt politically "homeless"[93] insofar as she found no official organizations with which she could cooperate,[94] the United Democratic Front (UDF),[95] created in 1983, gave her the opportunity to work with like-minded people. This increased political commitment in the 1980s (it is noteworthy that in the late 1980s Gordimer also joined the Congress of South African Writers[96]) certainly played a part in the formulation of her conception of the artist as a social actor, on which she reflected not only in "Relevance and Commitment" but also in her more well-known essay "The Essential Gesture" (1984).

"The Essential Gesture," originally The Tanner Lecture on Human Values delivered at the University of Michigan on 12 October 1984, remains Gordimer's most resonant commentary on the role of the writer in what she earlier famously called "the state of interregnum."[97] In "The Essential Gesture," Gordimer argued that white writers could either pledge allegiance to the existing, unjust social order or commit themselves to a new order that would undoubtedly arrive. She insisted that the white writers whose aim was to seek their place in the future, post-apartheid state should adopt one clear goal: "To raise the consciousness of white people, who, unlike himself, have not woken up."[98]

In formulating this conception of the writer—the writer as a "cultural worker"[99]—Gordimer was, in all likelihood, influenced by the Marxist politician and intellectual Ernst Fischer, who in his study *The Necessity of Art*[100] argued

93 Karen Lazar, "An Interview with Nadine Gordimer," in *A Writing Life: Celebrating Nadine Gordimer*, ed. Andries Walter Oliphant (London: Viking, 1998), 427.

94 The African National Congress (ANC), at that time an underground organization, was legalized as late as 1990, which is also when Gordimer officially joined it.

95 The United Democratic Front was a multiracial organization formed in August 1983. The movement's broad agenda included opposition to the government's constitutional reforms (especially the creation of the tricameral parliament) and a commitment to universal franchise.

96 The Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) was founded in 1988. For Gordimer, the creation of COSAW was an indication that "apartheid wasn't totally granite, that it was crumbling" and that black writers no longer sought to continue the politics of separatism that dominated the 1970s because of the Black Consciousness Movement.

97 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 269.

98 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 293.

99 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 293.

100 Gordimer referred to Fischer's book once in her essay, doing so to support her argument that the artists who belonged to a coherent society did not see it as an obstacle to their creative freedom if certain topics were imposed upon them.

that the artist should take "the role of illuminating social relationships, of enlightening men in societies becoming opaque."[101] For Fischer, writing about relationships was connected with exploring new forms of social contact, which remained the writer's unique contribution to their society:

> Even the most subjective artist works on behalf of society. By the sheer fact of describing feelings, relationships, and conditions that have not been described before, he channels them from his apparently isolated "I" into a "we", and this "we" can be recognized even in the brimming subjectivity of an artist's personality.[102]

What Gordimer may have found appealing in Fischer's book was his notion of writing as a process by which writers can reach out beyond their isolation to claim their identity as social actors. Importantly, this process does not entail leaving the realm of the personal; on the contrary, the writer's role is to show social change by exploring the interiority of the protagonists and the relationships between them.

The discussion of the role of the writer brings us to the central notion of transformation and to the contention that Gordimer looked upon writing as an act motivated by the desire to transform the world. This desire finds its realization in a process that she called "the transformation of experience," in the course of which the personal acquires wider significance. As we read in "The Essential Gesture," "the *transformation of experience* remains the writer's basic essential gesture; the lifting out of a limited category something that reveals its full meaning and significance only when the writer's imagination has expanded it."[103] Significantly, Gordimer wrote about "expanding"—not leaving—the realm of the personal, describing it as a process in which the personal acquires a wider social and political significance. To illustrate her point, she gave the example of Anna Akhmatova, who wrote about her personal plight (the death of her husband and the imprisonment of her son) in such a way that it became expressive of the suffering of the Russian people in the Stalinist era. Gordimer argued that similarly to Akhmatova, who may not necessarily have been so profoundly affected by her misfortunes as she claimed to be, South African

101 Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 14.

102 Fischer, *The Necessity of Art*, 46.

103 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 298.

writers could truthfully describe events that did not affect them directly, doing so by adopting Chekhov's dictum: "to describe a situation so truthfully . . . that the reader can no longer evade it."[104]

The transformation of experience—expanding the realm of the personal so that it has political significance—is, in Gordimer's understanding, a gesture that involves imagination. In "The Writer's Imagination and the Imagination of the State" (1986), originally an address delivered at the PEN Congress in New York, she reflected on the differences in the workings of individual, creative imagination of the writer and the state's understanding of imagination as delimited by historical and political allegiance. The most interesting passage in the context of the present discussion is the one in which she commented on the writer's role in revolution: "The Writer himself knows that the only revolution is the permanent one—not in the Trotskyite sense, but in the sense of the imagination, in which no understanding is ever completed, but must keep breaking up and re-forming in different combination if it is to spread and meet the terrible questions of human existence."[105] In Gordimer's view, the "revolutionary" role of the artist is to show change, understood as a dynamic process in which the understanding of human existence (of which politics is part) is shaped to meet the demands of the present.

By bringing together two conceptions of the artist formulated by Gordimer—the artist as "an agent of change"[106] and the artist as a "cultural worker"[107]—we can arrive at her deeply political conception of writing as exploring the underlying complexity and dynamism of a given situation, and—in this way—participating in social change by acting on the consciousness of her readers, especially her white readers.[108] At the basis of this conception of writing is the tension between detachment and involvement: detachment enables the writer to distance herself from both personal and political allegiances, while

104 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 299.

105 Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History*, 193.

106 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 142.

107 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 293.

108 As it was mentioned, Gordimer's understanding of the writer as a "cultural worker" entailed addressing white readers. This said, it should be added that Gordimer emphasized that when writing, she had no audience in mind. In a 1982 interview by Robert Boyers, Clark Blaise, Terence Diggory, and Jordan Elgrably, when asked whether she wrote for readers in South Africa or outside of this country, she stated simply that she wrote for anyone who wanted to read her books. Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 191.

involvement gives an insight into a reality that transcends superficial, factual accounts of a given situation.

To conclude, the conception of the artist as an agent of change, which Gordimer evolved in the 1980s, made it possible for her to reconcile her fascination with the nuances of the human psyche with her social and political commitment. It also enabled her to redefine her role as a white writer and public intellectual in terms of individual empowerment. For Gordimer, change became not only a necessity but also a political and artistic principle in which she believed deeply and which—she was confident—would make her relevant as a writer both in the times of the interregnum and in a future, post-apartheid South Africa.

Post-apartheid Stories: Some Features of Gordimer's Late Style

After the first democratic elections in South Africa, Gordimer continued to express her belief in the social and political role of the writer. In her post-1994 non-fiction writing, she frequently emphasized what she saw as a permanent and inevitable connection between literature and politics. In her 1995 Jawaharlal Memorial Lecture titled "Our Century," she argued that "politics and literature cannot be kept hierarchically apart."[109] Seeing politics as a force shaping human existence, she insisted that it is politics that dictates the style of writing, defining the latter as "the identification between the author and [the] destined political context."[110] In this conception, to write is, first of all, to recognize the political situation unique to a given writer and to respond to it in one's works.

It is important to note that Gordimer's emphasis on the political did not make her lose sight of the individual; on the contrary, she never ceased to emphasize the ability of writers to explore and bring to light the obscure motivations that drive people in their actions. In the lecture "Adam's Rib: Fictions and Realities" (1994), she observed that writers are capable of viewing the features that remain deeply hidden within a person and conveying them in their prose: "For one of the few sure things the writer knows is that inconsistency is the consistency of human character."[111] As she insisted, grasping this dynamic and elusive truth about the human character should be the ultimate aim of writers.

109 Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History*, 224.

110 Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History*, 224–225.

111 Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, 6.

In a discussion of her seventh novel *Burger's Daughter* (1979), she presented her conception of truth not as verisimilitude but as faithfulness to other people's experience—a fleeting kind of experiential truth which she called "a vapour of the truth condensed,"[112] only to be reached through imagination and talent.

The surface-depth opposition, which informs "Adam's Rib: Fictions and Realities," can also be found in one of her last essays on writing, "Witness: The Inward Testimony" (2006). Referring to Marcel Proust, Gordimer argues that "the march of thought ... proceeds downwards, into the depths ... towards the goal of truth."[113] Her attempts to plumb the depths of human motivations in an attempt to reach the truth are evident in her later stories, especially those narrated in the third person, which resemble detailed reports of the thoughts and emotions that preoccupy their protagonists. This brings us to the difference between the stories written in the 1970s and the 1980s and her later works. While the stories of Gordimer's middle period tend to concentrate on human interaction, later ones take us directly to the minds of her characters. This does not mean that we are given the comfort of a consistent and unified perspective; on the contrary, the third-person narrator employs focalized narration and free indirect discourse combined in such a way that the readers sometimes have to pause and consider to whom—which voice inside of the protagonist's consciousness—they are to attribute a particular statement. The intricate way in which Gordimer merges third-person narration with narratorial commentary and free indirect discourse can be seen in the following passage, taken from "**The Second Sense**" (*Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 2007), which describes a wife's decision to accept her husband as the dominant partner in their relationship:

> Paula went to computer courses and became proficient. If you're not an artist of some kind, or a doctor, a civil rights lawyer, what other skill makes you of use in a developing country? Chosen, loved by the one you love; what more meaningful than being necessary to him in a practical sense as well, with the ability to support his vocation whose achievements are yours by proxy. "What do you do?" Can't you see? She makes fulfilment possible, for both of them.[114]

112 Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, 12.

113 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 691.

114 Nadine Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 158.

While the first sentence of the paragraph is a simple narratorial summary of events in the story, the second and third pose a problem: Are they written in free indirect discourse or are they rather an instance of narratorial commentary—a summary of Paula's deliberations on what role to assume in their relationship? As we reach the striking conclusion of this paragraph (the question that we imagine might have been posed by her husband's friends, and the answer, either formulated or mediated by the narrator), it seems for a brief while as if there was a dialogic relationship between the narrator and the character—a kind of collaboration in which the two were trying to arrive at a feasible explanation of Paula's freely-chosen subordinate role in the family. As the narrator formulates the last sentence, which resembles an attempt to defend Paula in front of her husband's friends, we can sense a subtle irony, which becomes stronger as the story unfolds.

The passage quoted from "The Second Sense" illustrates a more general tendency in Gordimer's last two volumes: *Loot* (2003) and *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black* (2007). Seemingly disconnected passages and one-sentence paragraphs repeated like musical refrains draw the reader into the working of the focalized consciousness, much in the way that Gordimer's earlier fiction throws the reader headlong into the middle of a vibrant conversation between characters. As one reviewer wrote of *Loot*, comparing the stories collected in this volume to "messages [transmitted] on an analogue telephone network": "They are fragmented into tiny units of consciousness, experience and human emotion, and delivered to the reader for careful reassembly."[115] If there is any unity to be achieved, it is in the reader's consciousness.

There is good reason to view Gordimer's last works as sharing certain characteristics of style. Graham Riach argues that the stories collected in her final three volumes can be described as "late style." Referring to Theodor Adorno's and Edward Said's notions of late style, especially their claim that it "lies in rupture and fragmentation,"[116] Riach notes that Gordimer's late style manifests itself in three distinctive features of her post-1991 stories: "syntactical complexity, self-reflexivity, and intertextual allusion."[117] Riach rightly points out that

115 Rachel Holmes, "The Treasures Left After a Tidal Wave," *The Telegraph*, June 9, 2003, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3596284/The-treasures-left-after-the-tidal-wave.html.

116 Graham Riach, "The Late Nadine Gordimer," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42, no. 6, (2016): 1078, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2016.1249139.

117 Riach, "The Late Nadine Gordimer," 1084. The three late stylists discussed by Riach are Samuel Beckett, William Shakespeare, and Ludwig van Beethoven.

what unifies the stories in the last two collections is their concentration on death and mourning.[118] It should be added that those topics are by no means new in Gordimer's oeuvre; on the contrary, even a cursory analysis of her fiction shows her enduring engagement with loss and suffering. Among the stories that explore these topics are "A Watcher of the Dead," "The Prisoner," and "Talisman" from the second collection *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* (1952); "Enemies" from the third volume *Six Feet of the Country* (1956); "Message in a Bottle" from the fifth collection *Not for Publication* (1956); "Terminal" from *Something Out There* (1984); "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off" and "My Father Leaves Home" from *Jump* (1991); "Visiting George," "L,U,C,I,E" from *Loot*; "Dreaming of the Dead," "A Frivolous Woman," and "Allesverloren" from *Beethoven*, and "Afterlife," published in *Salmagundi*. What characterizes Gordimer's last stories is that they are more contemplative, personal, and poignant in mood, featuring characters grappling with loss and trying to find in the act of remembering the comfort that will sustain them in moments of crisis.

What can certainly be seen in Gordimer's later short fiction is her close interest in the working of the human mind. Reading these stories, which intricately weave third-person narratorial report and summary with passages of focalized narrative and free indirect discourse, one has the impression that Gordimer's main objective was to enact—and bring her readers into—the dynamic thought processes of her characters. This is achieved not only through the constant alternation between different narrative perspectives but also through the different voices that speak within free indirect narration. In "**Allesverloren**," a woman mourning the loss of her husband is confronted by his past, especially his short-lived affair with a man:

> How it came about she could and had fully entered with him; the "unnaturalness" of it—not in the sense of some moral judgment on homosexuals, but that she knew, in the exalted gratification he found in her femaleness, that *this* was what was natural to *his* sexuality. It had

118 Of *Loot*, Riach writes: "The collection is dedicated to Reinhold Cassirer, Gordimer's husband, who died in 2001, and the collection is heavy with loss and the awareness of finitude." Riach, "The Late Nadine Gordimer," 1086. He comments on *Beethoven*: "The collection as a whole feels disjointed. What coherence there is comes from a pervasive reckoning with the dynamics of loss." Riach, "The Late Nadine Gordimer," 1089.

happened as part of the ugly desperation and humiliation of the first marriage. He would accept any distraction, then.[119]

There is not one, not two, but three voices speaking in this passage, and it is the task of the reader to decide whether they speak in unison or whether there is some discord—subtle or otherwise—in the passage. At the forefront is the voice of the woman, as relayed by the narrator, superimposed on the hardly audible voice of her husband. Are we to attribute all the words ("the 'unnaturalness,'" "the ugly desperation," "humiliation") to the woman, or are they words that she remembers from intimate conversations with her husband? To what extent is she speaking *for* him? Can we hear the husband's voice there at all? It is impossible to tell. What we can sense through the woman's attempt to appropriate her husband's voice is her deep need to confirm her own viewpoint in the search for comfort in her loss.

Conclusion: Gordimer's "Modernist Realism or Realist Modernism"

This chapter began with a reference to Gordimer's literary influences, especially Chekhov, Mansfield, Kafka, and Hemingway. As I have shown, the significance of modernist writers in Gordimer's oeuvre is noticed also in the most recent criticism of her fiction, which is perhaps most visible in Rita Barnard's article on Gordimer's "situated postcolonial modernism."[120] Barnard does not oppose modernism to realism; on the contrary, she views realism as an essentially modernist project—what she calls "modernism's first incarnation."[121] She makes references to two definitions of realism: one by Frederic Jameson, who describes realism in terms of "explor[ing] the hitherto unsaid and unexpressed"[122] (an especially pertinent definition in the context of Gordimer's writing, with her emphasis on giving voice to the unspoken); the other definition by Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, who, similarly to Gordimer, reject the reductive notion of realism as reproducing reality. As Esty and Lye argue, "a realistic mode of representation is meant not to reproduce reality . . . , but to interrupt the quasi-natural

119 Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 90.

120 Barnard, "Locating Gordimer," 100–101.

121 Barnard, "Locating Gordimer," 113.

122 Barnard, "Locating Gordimer," 113.

perception of reality as a mere given."[123] In Gordimer's case, this interruption of the seemingly natural should be viewed not so much as a metafictional technique that exposes the contrived nature of the represented world but as a means of bringing to light the acquired nature of social and political discourses (such as the divisive and discriminatory discourse of apartheid) dominant in a particular time and place. Indeed, it was Gordimer's goal throughout her career to interrupt the perception of reality that the architects and proponents of apartheid created and propagated as 'natural' among both the victims and the perpetrators.

"Interruption" is a word that recurs both in Esty and Lye's definition of realism and in Barnard's discussion of what she calls "Gordimer's modernist realism or realist modernism."[124] In her compelling interpretation of the novella "Something Out There," Barnard shows how Gordimer brings into conflict two different temporalities in two overriding narratives in this work. As Barnard writes, these two narratives present two conflicting destinies, which come into conflict as the activities of the freedom fighters disrupt the "'normal' unfolding of preordained time."[125] Interruption, as used by Esty and Lye, and adopted by Barnard, also inspired Gordimer's most influential critic, Stephen Clingman, who focused his article on this notion, presenting it as a key to her work: "Interruption became in Gordimer's time and place, and through her capacities and preoccupations as a writer, a form of perception, being, and understanding."[126] Clingman uses the notion of interruption to explore the stylistic, structural, and thematic dimensions of Gordimer's novels and stories. In most of these critical excursions into Gordimer's prose, interruption is a technique that functions primarily on the plane of the plot and of the relationships between characters. To give an example, in "The Train from Rhodesia" (*Trek* (11.21), 1947; *Face to Face*, 1949) the brief stop at a train station (a train journey interrupted) leads to "the more important interruption . . . in the prevailing liberal assumptions

123 Qtd. in Barnard, "Locating Gordimer," 114.

124 Barnard, "Locating Gordimer," 114.

125 Barnard, "Locating Gordimer," 115. For a more extended discussion of Gordimer's novella see Chapter Three.

126 Stephen Clingman, "Gordimer, Interrupted," *Nadine Gordimer: De-Linking, Interrupting, Severing, Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 14, http://doi.org/10.4000/ces.413.

and colonial habits of mind"[127] of the two young protagonists, as the husband suddenly displays attitudes of racism and discrimination, thus shocking his young wife and initiating what may well become a crisis in their marriage.

Considering the notion of "interruption" in the context of short story criticism, I would argue that the term is reminiscent of the term "disruption" (indeed, at times they are used interchangeably), both describing a sudden change in the life of the protagonists, including their values, beliefs, and emotions. When defined in this general way, the notion of interruption/disruption has been part of literary criticism for some time; to give one example, Charles E. May has maintained that the disruption of ordinary life is precisely what the short story presents, thus destabilizing our perception of the world.[128] Applied in the discussion of Gordimer's stories, disruption is a useful concept insofar as those works do indeed often concentrate on protagonists whose perception of the world is challenged as a result of a sudden and unanticipated event. On the other hand, it should be noted that some of Gordimer's stories present characters who despite changed circumstances, persist in their beliefs despite the fact that those beliefs no longer appear credible, or are even completely unfeasible.

To conclude this discussion, while the notion of interruption/disruption can be productively applied in the analysis of Gordimer's works, this study is informed by a different approach, stressing the political orientation of her writing on the one hand, and—on the other—the insistence that no literature worthy of this name is reducible to politics. Emphasizing the notion of truth in Gordimer's writing, I intend to read Gordimer's prose both as an artistic response to a given historical reality and as an anticipation of a new social, political, and cultural order. The ways in which she looked forward to this new order, responding to the changing situation in her country, will be the subject of the chapters that follow.

127 Clingman, "Gordimer, Interrupted," 15.

128 "It [the short story] presents moments in which we become aware of anxiety, loneliness, dread, concern, and thus find the safe, secure and systematic life we usually lead disrupted and momentarily destroyed." Charles May, *I Am Your Brother: Short Story Studies* (Createspace Independent Publishing, 2013), 63.

Chapter Two

Mismeetings and Failures of Communication: Interracial Relationships

Focusing on the Experiential Truth about Life under Apartheid

In an interview she gave in 1982, when asked what she would write about if she was not preoccupied with apartheid, Nadine Gordimer observed: "I don't write about apartheid. I write about people who happen to live under that system. I'm not a propagandist, I'm not a reporter. I am a natural writer."[1] This comment is especially significant insofar as it points to an important quality of Gordimer's stories—their sustained and consistent focus on people and the relationships between them. It is in the interaction between her protagonists that Gordimer sought the experiential truth about human beings, which remains at the heart of her writing. Gordimer's insistence on the notion of truth stemmed from her conviction that a nuanced exploration of the needs, desires, emotions, and beliefs of her protagonists does not preclude political engagement; indeed, the former is proof of the latter. This conviction shaped her fiction, which can be called both "an enactment of life"[2] and "an exploration of life."[3]

Throughout her career, Gordimer was deeply interested in the motivations that drive people in their actions and in their failures to act. This chapter will address this topic by exploring the relationships between the white and black South Africans in Gordimer's apartheid and post-apartheid stories. At the outset of this discussion, I would like to refer to Stephen Clingman's study *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside*, in which he asserts that

1 Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 210.

2 Nadine Gordimer, *Writing and Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 18.

3 Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times: Writing and Living, 1954–2008* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 591.

Gordimer's prose gives us "history from the inside,"[4] defined as "unique insight into historical experience in the period in which she has been writing."[5] That this is precisely what she sought to achieve is evident from her non-fiction writing. In a comment quoted by Clingman at the beginning of his study, Gordimer argues that while the facts concerning the 1812 retreat from Moscow can be found in a history book, the experience of participating in it can only be offered by literature. A more extended reflection on the power of literature is included in the lecture "Adam's Rib: Fictions and Realities" (1994), in which, speaking about her novel *Burger's Daughter*, Gordimer formulated her own version of truth based on faithfulness to other people's experience. As I observed in the Introduction, she saw this truth as embedded in the complexity of human motivations and in the dynamics of human interactions. It is not a factual but an experiential truth, and it can be defined as faithfulness both to the writer's experience and to the experience of the people described.

Viewing Gordimer's stories as an effort to explore the interiority of her protagonists, we should not lose sight of the fact that they also give us access to her own life as a writer and public intellectual. The stories paint the picture of a writer both shaping and shaped by the forces behind the social and political changes of her time. The outline of her political development, beginning with her debut in the 1940s and ending on her last short story collection in 2007, was given in Chapter One. As I claimed, what distinguished Gordimer as a writer and a public figure was her ability to distance herself first from the conservative values that characterized her social and ethnic background, then from the liberal humanist convictions that she shared with many white South African intellectuals in the 1950s and early 1960s. What was at first a token of her insecurity about her role as a writer ultimately became a source of empowerment, as she embraced the conception of the artist as "an agent of change,"[6] both exploring and participating in the social and political transformation of her country. First formulated in the late 1970s, this vision of the writer enabled her to scrutinize various subject positions, showing the complexity of her characters' emotions, the nuances of their interactions, and the ambiguity of their motivations.

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4 Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 1.

5 Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 1.

6 Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, ed. Stephen Clingman (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 142. For a more detailed description see Chapter One.

The brief outline of Gordimer's artistic and political development will serve as a framework for this chapter. Beginning with the stories informed by liberal humanist values, the discussion will show her gradual radicalization, manifesting itself not in supporting violent measures against social injustice but in rejecting the allegiances that she considered obstacles to social change. The stories discussed later in this chapter will convey Gordimer's detachment both from the convictions that she decisively rejected and from those standpoints with which she sympathized but which she decided to test in the microcosms of her stories.

Liberal Humanism and Interracial Communication

The best place to begin the discussion of Gordimer's early short stories is with her description of liberal humanism in South Africa. In a 1979 interview with Johannes Riis, she argued that in the 1950s she and other liberals believed in "the Forsterian 'only connect'"[7]; in other words, in social progress through interracial understanding. This belief manifested itself in her concentration on that which stood in the way of reaching such an understanding—what Studs Terkel called, in a 1962 interview with Gordimer, "man's lack of communication."[8] Asked whether the failure of communication was a recurring theme in her works, Gordimer gave the following emphatic response:

> I have dealt *mostly* with this kind of half-world where people do meet—black and white—and because of the general set-up around them, and other inequalities forced upon them, they tend *just* to go past, *just* to miss. I must admit I have written again and again about the moment of communication that doesn't *quite* come off.[9]

Gordimer's contention that some of her stories focus on moments of unsuccessful communication will be the foundation of a thesis central to this chapter, which can be formulated as follows: one of the most important themes in Gordimer's fiction is the failure of ethical response to the Other. This failure

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7 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 102. Gordimer is referring to Chapter XXII of E. M. Forster's novel *Howards End* (1910).

8 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 19.

9 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 19.

often results from the protagonist's decision to make empathy subordinate to reason and, in this way, defend oneself from what is seen as an excessive claim made by the Other. Several of the stories discussed in this chapter examine the workings of this defense mechanism, whose aim is to justify one's distance with respect to the Other and to disarm any possible feelings of guilt connected with one's passivity. All of this is far from saying that Gordimer's protagonists react uniformly to the Other; on the contrary, the stories analysed below show a variety of responses, depending on the characters' situation, character, intelligence, experience, ethical predisposition, and goodwill. While some characters have created for themselves what seems a near-perfect comfort zone, others emerge from their encounter with the Other with a keen sense of failure.

What exactly is meant by the failure of ethical response to the Other and what lies at the root of this failure are two questions that can be fruitfully addressed from the perspective of Zygmunt Bauman's postmodern ethics. In his 1991 study *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Bauman proposes the term "mismeeting" (as a translation of Martin Buber's term *Vergegnung*, as distinct from *Begegnung*—a meeting) to describe a deliberate strategy conceived by the subject who cannot circumvent their encounter with the Other. "Mismeeting" is an encounter whose aim is to "*de-ethicalize* the relationship with the Other": "Its overall effect is a denial of the stranger as a moral object and a moral subject."[10] Bauman discusses the notion of mismeeting also in *Postmodern Ethics*, published two years later. In a subchapter tellingly entitled "The Arcane Art of Mismeeting," he points out that the aim of a mismeeting is to "relegate the other[11] into the background" and turn them into "an irrelevant presence"—"a non-being being."[12]

The Late 1940s and the 1950s: Criticising Well-Intentioned Passivity

Gordimer's comment on unsuccessful interracial communication and Bauman's notion of mismeeting can both shed light on her first collection *Face to Face* (1949), which constitutes her early attempt to explore relationships between

10 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 63.

11 Bauman capitalizes the term "Other" in *Modernity and Ambivalence*, but he does not do so in *Postmodern Ethics.* The capitalized version will be used throughout this chapter.

12 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 154.

members of different social and ethnic groups in her country. Her focus is on the coexistence of her characters as they are brought together—face to face—on the street, in a neighbourhood community, or in the family house. An early example of such a story is "**Monday is Better than Sunday**" (*Face to Face*, 1949), one of the first works in which Gordimer describes the exploitation of black domestic workers by white, middle-class families. The story is a painstakingly detailed record of the numerous tasks that Elizabeth, a domestic servant, has to perform to make her employers moderately satisfied with her work. While Gordimer concentrates on the slave-like labour that Elizabeth's employers demand of her on their leisure day (the eponymous Sunday), the story includes short passages that convey the attitude of the white family towards Elizabeth. One of those passages—perhaps the most powerful of all—can be found halfway through the story, when the daughter of the family expresses her surprise at Elizabeth's baffling behavior: "That girl's a bit queer. She's saying Oh Jesus! Oh Jesus! all the time she's doing the bath."[13] The daughter's surprise shows that the instrumental treatment of their servant is based on their willed blindness: their inability or reluctance to see Elizabeth as a human being. At the centre of the story is the family's tendency to look upon Elizabeth solely in terms of a function she is supposed to perform in their household; in other words, what is emphasized in the story is the family's perception of their servant as "a non-being being," as Bauman described it.

Gordimer's main focus in her early work is the consciousness of her white characters, including those who—like the family in "Monday is Better than Sunday"—live their lives surrounded by black South Africans, yet do not acknowledge their humanity. "**No Luck To-night**" (*South African Opinion* (2.4), 1944; *Face to Face*, 1949) explores this mindset in a first-person narrative. The story is narrated by a man whose tranquil evening with his wife is interrupted by the arrival of the soldiers from the Civic Guard searching for beer illegally brewed by his black servants. Their visit is, above all, an inconvenience and a possible threat to the smooth functioning of his house as the possible arrest of his servants, Solomon and Letty, will face him with the inevitable task of hiring and training new ones. It is with the aim of guarding the comfortable and peaceful life of his family that the man conspires with his servants to hide their beer. This decision does not stem from recognizing his servants' needs; indeed, he hardly acknowledges their presence as human beings, seeing them

13 Nadine Gordimer, *Face to Face* (Johannesburg: Silver Leaf Books, 1949), 160.

largely in terms of animal characteristics: Solomon, overcome by panic at being raided by the police, is present to the narrator only because of "the odour of fear emanating from a trapped animal,"[14] and Letty, with her passion for colour, is compared to "a monkey [that] will hoard bright objects in the corner of his cage."[15] The image of entrapment, present in both similes, conveys the man's attitude to Solomon and Letty: while he does not wish to see them imprisoned—consigned to a place where they will be of no worth to him—he supports a system that confines his servants to their places, giving them license to emerge only when they are of use to him and his family.

"No Luck To-night" is an interesting story due to Gordimer's flawed handling of the first-person narrative. Halfway through the story, the narrator, who remains a passive onlooker, describes the policemen searching through Letty's belongings. In reaction to a policeman's casual observation that her linen is probably stolen from her mistress, the man's irritation turns into anger, as he is made fully aware of the racism underlying the policemen's behaviour. The expression of man's moral outrage is perhaps the weakest part of the story insofar as it comes across as abstracted and theoretical; certainly far from consistent with his racist attitude towards his servants. It is in the structural inconsistency of this comment that we can sense authorial intervention: one can quite clearly hear Gordimer speaking above the head of her narrator, expressing her views on the injustices of apartheid.

The theme of well-intentioned but passive South Africans received a more self-conscious and ironic treatment in "**Ah, Woe is Me**" (*Common Sense* (8.9), 1947; *Face to Face*, 1949). Narrated by a white South African woman, the story concentrates on her black servant Sarah, who worked in the woman's household for many years, but, due to an illness that affected her legs and made it impossible for her to do manual labour, she retired to her home, facing a swift decline into poverty of herself and her children. The title of the story is a reference to Sarah's frequent exclamation, supposed to convey her general attitude to life.[16]

14 Gordimer, *Face to Face*, 137.

15 Gordimer, *Face to Face*, 140.

16 As the white woman writes, "At first we laughed at the Biblical ostentation of the exclamation, apparently so out of proportion; but later we understood. Ah, woe is me, she said; and that was her comment on life." Gordimer, *Face to Face*, 16. Sarah's exclamation is part of a larger passage taken from Job 10:15: "If I be wicked, woe unto me; and if I be righteous, yet

"Ah, Woe is Me" has at its centre the white home with its spatial division of the suburban property into "the nice house" (aptly called by Rita Barnard "the final holdout of 'colonial consciousness'"[17]), the servants' quarters, and the yard. The yard is an in-between space; conveniently removed from the privacy of the house and safely separated from the street, it allows the white family to keep their servants in useful proximity but at a comfortable distance. It is significant that the white woman allows Sarah to invite her children for Christmas as long as they stay in the yard. It is also in the yard that the woman meets Sarah's daughter, Janet, and learns about Sarah's serious troubles: the poverty into which she and her whole family were thrown when her ill health made her incapable of work. The brief, practical questions asked by the woman may be seen as an expression of concern, but since they are not backed by any concrete actions, they are better viewed as attempts to short-circuit any possible emotional reaction on the part of the distraught girl.

The irony in "Ah, Woe Is Me" is that the white woman is aware neither of her attempts to dictate the terms of social exchange nor of her use of space to accentuate racial division. Her description of Sarah implies that the woman is a secular humanist, who treats conservative missionary school education, with "its tactful emphasis on the next world rather than this,"[18] as an ideological instrument designed to perpetuate racial inequality. What she fails to see is that she is the benefactress of this social system; indeed, the lesson imbibed by Sarah and passed on to her children—the conviction that black and coloured South Africans should not seek "a share in the White Man's place"[19]—is fully exploited by the white woman, for whom the cultural and spatial division of the races is taken for granted.

The self-deception of the female protagonist, based on her false conviction of political non-involvement, is visible at every step of her narrative. She describes her servant's life mostly as a story of misfortune, in which she had no other role to play than that of a passive observer. Her passivity concerning

will I not lift up my head. I am full of confusion; therefore see thou mine affliction" (King James Version). Considered in this context, the exclamation is a critical comment—unintended by Sarah, of course—on the passive, albeit well-intentioned, stance of the woman.

17 Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 55.

18 Gordimer, *Face to Face*, 16–17.

19 Gordimer, *Face to Face*, 17.

Sarah's misfortunes and her blindness to the plight of her servant are conveyed in such succinct statements as "I suppose they were getting poorer,"[20] referring to the time when Sarah, overcome by illness, was no longer able to serve in her household and so disappeared from view. For the white woman, the responsibility for the other person is only felt when that person is present; it is significant that in Sarah's absence, any sense of obligation expires, as if the world into which her former servant has retreated was wholly outside of the woman's reach.

The extreme narrowness of the narrator's perspective brings us to the central metaphor of the story, which is that of seeing as understanding, or—in this case—seeing as the failure to understand. This failure is conveyed in a passage in which the white woman describes Sarah's first and only visit after she is forced to retire from her work:

> She came to *see* me, troubled, I could *see*, by the strong feeling that they had lost a foot-hold; but *seeing* a check to their slipping feet and seeking a comfort in the consolation that although their education would not be as good, she herself would be able to train them the way they should go. She sat on the kitchen chair as she told me, slowly settling her legs, swathed like great pillars in crêpe bandage.[21]

"See" recurs three times in the quoted paragraph: twice in the context of Sarah ("see me" and "seeing a check to") and once in reference to the narrator, who claims to "see" (meaning understand) the reasons for Sarah's agitation. The fact that seeing also denotes the process of observing is quite clear from the last sentence of the passage, in which the narrator views Sarah in the context of her weight and her incapacitation—as she does throughout the story. What is shown here is the white woman's inability (or unwillingness) to use her understanding of her servant's situation as a basis for concrete action. This failure is marked in the last sentence by the sudden switch from understanding to seeing—a regression that shows a change from the stance of involvement (or rather, the first stage of involvement—understanding) to disinvolvement and passivity. The same mechanism can be observed in the last scene of the story, in which Sarah's daughter, Janet, visits the white woman in what becomes

20 Gordimer, *Face to Face*, 21.

21 Gordimer, *Face to Face*, 21 (my emphasis).

a failed appeal for help. Broken by the misfortune that has been visited upon her family, Janet is reduced to tears. Nonplussed by this unexpected reaction, the woman asks herself: "What could I do for her? What could I do?"[22], after which she hands the crying girl a handkerchief. Once again, any reflection on her role in the situation is short-circuited, as she formulates her questions only in response to her immediate reality.

In "Ah, Woe is Me," what lies at the basis of the narrator's passive, albeit well-intentioned, approach to black South Africans is the inability to move beyond "seeing" as understanding into empathy and involvement. It seems that she is locked into her role as an uninvolved observer—a position that does not absolve her of responsibility, since she does little to counteract it. There is a sense of helplessness in this stance, which, genuine though it may be, is also convenient insofar as it justifies the woman's passivity. The stance of helplessness, then, may be seen as a strategy of relegating the Other into the background (Bauman's definition of the mismeeting), but it is also a means of concealing the feeling of guilt, connected with her inaction. A revealing insight into this feeling can be found in *The Lying Days*, in which Helen Shaw describes it as "the slow corrosive guilt, a guilt personal and inherited, amorphous as the air and particular as the tone of your own voice, which, admitted or denied, is in all white South Africans."[23] Stephen Clingman observes that Helen's guilt is "located in the gap between what she realizes ethically and what she is capable of practically."[24] He describes this guilt as "a characteristically white liberal feeling," which makes *The Lying Days* "in some sense a 'liberal' novel."[25]

Clingman's comment on *The Lying Days* needs elaboration in the context of Gordimer's short stories, whose characters often feel guilty as a result of the gap between what they realize ethically and what they are unwilling to accept in reality. What Gordimer shows is not so much the inability to translate ideals of equality into action but both the inability *and reluctance* to do so. In such stories as "Monday is Better than Sunday" (*Face to Face*, 1949), "Ah, Woe is Me" (*Common Sense* (8.9), 1947; *Face to Face*, 1949), "Happy Event" (*The Forum* (2.9), 1953, *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956), and "Horn of Plenty" (*Six Feet of the Country*, 1956), we are confronted with white South Africans who are reluctant to see

22 Gordimer, *Face to Face*, 25.

23 Nadine Gordimer, *The Lying Days* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), 212.

24 Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 31.

25 Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 31.

themselves as part of a master-servant relationship, yet they are resolved to draw the benefits from this unequal balance of power. This willed blindness was one of the subjects of her lecture "1959: What is Apartheid?," in which she addressed the topic of the social and economic divide between black and white South Africans, attributing racial discrimination to the fact that people of different races lead isolated lives, which demand little meaningful communication between them. She also asserted that apartheid had influenced the mentality of the white population, leading to "a sealing-off of responses, the cauterisation of the human heart."[26]

A powerful depiction of the corrupting influence of racial division in South Africa can be found in "**Happy Event**" (*The Forum* (2.9), 1953, *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956). Contrary to its ironic title, the story concentrates on an event which disrupts, albeit momentarily, the calm and prosperous life of Ella and Allan Plaistow. When the couple is visited by the police, they learn that their African servant, Lena, is guilty of killing her infant child and abandoning it in the street. As Ella, a mother of two, learns about this tragedy, she is first taken aback by the realization of how little she knew her servant and then overcome by feelings that she finds more difficult to understand: "Her own heart was pounding slowly. She felt a horrible conflict of agitation and shame—for what, she did not know."[27] With time, however, the uneasy reaction turns into hostility, as she calls her servant a "ghoulish creature" and a "murderer."[28]

The reaction that transforms the sense of moral disgust into hostility can be viewed as Ella's attempt to dissociate herself from the situation, and it is only on closer reading that one fully realizes the enormity of moral blindness which it involves. It is a significant detail that the satin gown in which Lena wrapped her dead baby before abandoning it in the street is in all probability the very gown which Ella wore in hospital for the abortion of her third baby. The reader learns about Ella's abortion at the beginning of the story, but since it is never mentioned explicitly, it is easy to miss. The first page of the story describes not so much Ella's abortion but her attempts to explain it away by rationalizing it. In the background of this process stands Ella's husband, with

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26 Nadine Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History: Notes from Our Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 110.

27 Nadine Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country: Fifteen Short Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 164.

28 Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country*, 165.

his argument that drives the wedge between the mind and the body: "It's your *body* that objects . . . . There's some sort of physical protest that's got nothing to do with you at all, really."[29] In this formulation, the body becomes an other whose claims should be ignored in the conviction that they will pass and the mind will reassert its control. As we learn, Ella comes to share her husband's perspective in the knowledge that another child would make it impossible for them to fulfil their plans for a long holiday in Europe. The argument about the need to subdue the body resonates in the whole story since Ella's servant, Lena, strives to achieve the same aim without the discretion and physical comfort enjoyed by her mistress. That Ella fails to acknowledge this fact, choosing to suppress the moral intuitions embedded in her agitation and the feeling of shame, is the central paradox in the story, pointing to an utter failure of empathy. Ella's failure to empathize with Lena also shows the gap between them and illustrates Gordimer's more general point that "the basis of color cuts right through the sisterhood or brotherhood of sex."[30]

One common feature of the stories discussed so far in this chapter is that they show the white women's failure to acknowledge the implications of their position as the colonizer. In this sense, their stance is a kind of self-inflicted blindness, which makes it possible for them to derive benefit from their superior social position while at the same time holding on to liberal humanist values. This divided stance may be viewed as part of their attempt to evade the feeling of guilt stemming from their implication in an unjust social system. Rephrasing Albert Memmi's influential observation,[31] Gordimer's women try to accept the role of the colonizer without acknowledging the blame; by doing so, they create in themselves a schizoid personality split, which lays them bare to authorial irony.

As I have argued in this subchapter, what was distinctive of Gordimer's political development in the 1950s was her optimistic, liberal humanist belief in the possibility of reaching interracial understanding, as well as her contention that this understanding would be more durable than social and political divisions. As she wrote in the already mentioned lecture "1959: What is Apartheid?,"

29 Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country*, 152.

30 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 203.

31 "Accepting his role as colonizer, the colonialist accepts the blame implied by that role." Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, trans. Howard Greenfeld (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 51.

"living together, it is just possible that we might survive white domination, black domination, and all the other guises that hide us from each other."[32] If Gordimer's belief in the value of liberal humanism was being undermined by political events[33] in the late 1950s, the year 1960 must have brought this process to a conclusion. On 21 March 1960, police attacked anti-pass demonstrators in Sharpeville, killing 69 and wounding 186 people. The Sharpeville Massacre was followed by a State of Emergency, the delegalizing of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). It was also in 1960 that the ANC created its military wing Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) as a response to state violence.[34] By that time, the liberal humanist ideal of interracial understanding must have appeared to Gordimer as a distant dream.

The 1960s: Exploring the Crisis of Liberal Humanist Beliefs

Gordimer continued to explore the impact of apartheid on the mindset of her characters in the 1960s. A good example of such a story is "**The Pet**"[35] **(***The New Yorker*, 24 March 1962; *Not for Publication*, 1965), which has, at its silent centre, a black man called Gradwell, an immigrant from Nyasaland working as a servant in the house of affluent white South Africans. Since Gradwell is an illegal worker, his life is confined to the premises of the Morgan household—he becomes, effectively, a prisoner. Gradwell's voluntary confinement is part of a tacit arrangement with the Morgans, on the basis of which he keeps a low profile in Johannesburg. While Erica Morgan jokingly presents herself as her

32 Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History*, 114.

33 As Stephen Clingman observes, the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), founded in 1959, questioned the value of multiculturalism, which lay at the foundations of liberal humanism in South Africa.

34 Nelson Mandela explained the creation of Umkhonto we Sizwe in the following words: "Firstly, we believed that as a result of Government policy, violence by the African people had become inevitable . . . . Secondly, we felt that without violence there would be no way open to the African people to succeed in their struggle against the principle of white supremacy." Qtd. in Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, *South Africa. The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (London: Routledge, 2011), 62.

35 It is interesting to add that Gordimer did not have a high opinion of this story. In a letter to Roger Angell, she wrote: "I always disliked it and knew it was not what it should be," Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 2 December 1963. Contrary to Gordimer's expectations, the story was accepted by *The New Yorker* and published on 24 March 1962.

servant's accomplice (she refers to "a sort of little conspiracy we're in together"[36]), she is, in fact, a beneficiary of the system that forces illegal immigrants to live on the margins of the divided South African society.

It is worthwhile to observe that Gradwell's physical confinement prevents him from expressing any potentially subversive emotions, such as anger. As we learn in the fifth paragraph of the story, after returning from a visit home, he made no attempts to conceal his frustration:

> When he had first come back to Johannesburg after he was married he had been moody for a while. He, who was, as Mrs. Morgan said, the "nicest, most docile person in the world," had quarrelled with the cook, and had taken offence at the first word of reproach from Mrs. Morgan.[37]

Gradwell's defiant stance is presented as atypical for him both in the context of how he had acted before this episode and how he behaved after. His anger, successfully disarmed, is now treated both as irregular and innocuous: the passage, narrated from the perspective of Erica Morgan, presents him as a "moody" and "docile" child who may once have had a fit of temper but who is, to all intents and purposes, a model servant. As the story of Gradwell's anger continues in the same paragraph with his ill-timed visit to a shebeen, it becomes clear that it is, in fact, an anecdote that Erica tells her friends to entertain them. Much like the shebeen, the brothel, which he resorts to visiting,[38] becomes a useful way in which the system maintains its relative stability to the satisfaction of its beneficiaries—the likes of Erica Morgan.

Gradwell's work for the Morgans depends on his ability to contain his potentially subversive emotions of anger and desire, accepting this state of affairs not as temporary but as permanent. In effect, his perspective becomes confined to the premises of the Morgan household. Gordimer draws a clear connection between spatial confinement and the emotional numbness of her protagonist.

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36 Nadine Gordimer, *Not for Publication and Other Stories* (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), 89.

37 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 88.

38 Compare this detail as described in the book and in the *New Yorker* edition of the story: "He went with prostitutes, but his deeper feelings hibernated" (Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 89); "His passions hibernated" (Nadine Gordimer, "The Pet," *New Yorker*, March 24, 1962, 80). The second, shorter and less outspoken version is characteristic of *The New Yorker*'s policy of leaving out overt sexual references in the published texts.

Gradwell's resigned awareness that the boundaries of the Morgan household are the limits of his existence is powerfully expressed in the last paragraph of the story, which describes what seems to be a gesture of sympathy towards Erica Morgan's hated pet bulldog. "Here"[39] (spoken in his own language, as if it was a private reflection), which Gradwell exclaims when throwing the dog a piece of bread, is the only word he utters in the entire story, in which he is otherwise either spoken to or spoken for. "Here," then, becomes both a gesture of sympathy for the dog, whose life is also dictated by the needs and desires of his mistress, and an expression of resignation and humiliation resulting from his spatial confinement.

In "The Pet," Gordimer shows that the disempowerment of the underprivileged is conveniently overlooked by those who profit from it. It is significant that Erica remains blind to the consequences of Gradwell's separation from his home—she continues to see her servant as a temporary worker, who can always visit his family. What is more, she expects Gradwell to validate this convenient fiction: when she begins to suspect that he may be depressed because of the long-term separation from his relatives, she suggests that he visit Nyasaland while the Morgan family is away on their planned trip to Europe. That Gradwell does not respond to Erica's suggestion[40] (not even for a moment does he consider a visit home) is no doubt a sign of his resignation, but, equally importantly, it is a token of Erica's total failure to grasp the situation in which her servant has found himself. The master-servant relation that is conveniently disguised by Erica in her patronizing attitude towards Gradwell points to one key feature of the mismeeting, which is an encounter wholly controlled by the subject (as Bauman writes, "I myself set the limits to which I would go"[41]), and thus contingent on fluctuations of mood and dynamic circumstances.

39 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 92.

40 The passage in question reads: "'Next year, when we go to Europe, we must take a chance and you must go home to Nyasaland while we're away. We'll have to try and work something, some sort of document that will pass,' said Mrs Morgan." Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 90. It is worth juxtaposing this passage with the version of the story published in *The New Yorker*: "'Next year, when we go to Europe, we must take a chance and you must go home to Nyasaland while we're away. We'll have to try and work something, some sort of pass that looks right.' *When she tried to talk to him about Nyasaland, she was always a little embarrassed to discover that he knew absolutely nothing of the interesting political developments among the Africans there.*" Gordimer, "The Pet," 35 (my emphasis).

41 Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 156.

Bauman's notion of mismeeting as a strategy of "relegat[ing] the other into the background" and turning them into "an irrelevant presence"[42] can also be applied in the discussion of Gordimer's story "**Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants**" (*Harper's Magazine* [as "Stranger in Town"], November 1964; *Not for Publication*, 1965). In many respects a tale of bitterness and disillusionment, the story is expressive of the general mood in South Africa in the 1960s.[43] Before analysing this story, it is worthwhile to mention its origins in the context of Gordimer's creative process. "Good Climate, Friendly Inhabitants" originated from a short note dated December 1963, in which Gordimer attempted a brief sketch of her protagonist in terms of her appearance and age, followed by the beginnings of a first-person narrative, which she later incorporated into the first paragraph. It seems that she was trying to find her way into the story first by conjuring up the image of her protagonist—that of a white, attractive, middle-aged woman—and then capturing her mode of speech. The woman, who is the narrator of the story, works in the office of a local garage. Taunted by the prospect of a romance with a handsome stranger, she becomes entangled in a puzzling relationship with the eponymous "stranger in town," about whom she knows very little. Paradoxically, it is his reluctance to talk about himself that convinces the woman that their life is based on an unspoken but deep understanding: "After I'd seen him a few times, it was just the same as if we were people who know each other so well they don't talk about themselves any more."[44]

In strong contrast to this attitude of reckless naivety stands the woman's guarded stance with respect to her co-worker, Mpanza Makiwane, or Jack, as he is known to her. It is quite clear from the beginning of the story that she and Jack have an understanding, which she is, nevertheless, keen to marginalize in her narrative. The exchanges with Jack—always initiated by the woman—are cut short by her before they develop into a longer conversation; they are, moreover, always accompanied by a comment that serves to disarm any anticipated criticism, for example, "I don't believe in discussing white people

42 Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 154.

43 Stephen Clingman, commenting on Gordimer's 1966 novel *The Late Bourgeois World,* writes: "Overall, there is a crucial new tone in the novel, marking a new mood for the mid-1960s. It is one of combined rage, frustration and resignation." Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 100.

44 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 173.

with natives, as a rule."[45] The message to her addressees is quite clear: her brief consultations with Jack are an exception to the rule, justified only because she has found herself in an exceptional situation. What is also quite clear is that the woman takes for granted her addressees' shared attitude concerning black South Africans, the implication being that since they—white South Africans—have found themselves in a historically and politically precarious moment (she reports Jack reading newspapers about "all these blacks who are becoming prime ministers and so on in other countries these days"[46]), they have to be doubly cautious in their cross-racial exchanges, doing what they can to maintain the status quo by asserting distance and—in this way—superiority over the black population.

By creating a contrast between the narrator's attitudes to the two men in the story—the stranger and Jack—Gordimer explores a racist mindset which has led the white woman to a paradoxical position of both trusting her black co-worker (she gives Jack her address in case of any emergencies) and marginalizing his role in her life. She views Jack as an unadmitted confidante who is supposed to reinforce her views, such as her contention that one has to be cautious in encounters with strangers. The understanding that she shares with him is no obstacle to denying his presence as a human being. Gordimer has travelled far from her contention that "living together, it is just possible that we might survive white domination, black domination, and all the other guises that hide us from each other, and discover ourselves to be identically human."[47] Her disillusionment with liberal humanism is conveyed in the narration of the story: by having her narrator address like-minded individuals in the assumption that this has become the default stance of white South Africans, she creates the image of a group calcified in its beliefs, with no intention of reaching beyond their racial and political allegiances.

Gordimer's growing scepticism with regard to liberal humanism is evident also in her novels, including *Occasion for Loving* (1963). The first novel published

45 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 173.

46 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 180. By the time the story was published in 1965, Tanganyika, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Zanzibar, Nyasaland, and Northern Rhodesia had regained independence, the latter two countries becoming Malawi and Zambia, respectively. In this sense, the story conveys the increasingly embattled sense of the South Africans hanging on to white supremacy.

47 Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History*, 114.

after the Sharpeville Massacre, *Occasion for Loving* "marks a point of transition for Gordimer, away from traditional, humanist conception of art, towards more politicized, post-humanist forms."[48] The failed love affair between the Englishwoman Ann Davis and the black artist and activist Gideon Shibalo is proof of the fact that even the most private and powerful of all bonds—that of love—is subject to the corrosive power of racial divisions instituted by apartheid. This frustrated realization refers not only to love but also to friendship—the bond which the liberals of the 1940s and the 1950s saw as transcending the racial and social divisions erected by early apartheid legislation. As Jessie remarks to her husband Tom, neither loyalty nor affection helped their friend Gideon Shibalo: "What's the good of us to him? What's the good of our friendship or her love?"[49]

Gordimer's profound doubt as to the possibility of reaching an interracial understanding is also present in the stories published in the 1960s. Especially interesting in this regard is "**Not for Publication**" (*Contrast* 12 (3.4); *The Atlantic*, April 1965 [as "Praise"]; *Not for Publication*, 1965), in which Gordimer shows that suppressed aggression towards the Other results not from frustration or apprehension but rather from the tendency to project one's values and convictions onto the Other. "Not for Publication," the original title of which was "Notes for a Definitive Biography: Not for Publication," was intended as a novel in the form of a biography about an impoverished African who becomes the Prime Minister of an unspecified African country. Gordimer was drawn to this topic but found herself incompetent to write it. As she explained, "the fact is that as I am not a politically motivated person myself, how can I ever understand deeply enough the growth of such a person?"[50]

"Not for Publication" concentrates on an African boy called Praise Basetse who spends several years of his early childhood in poverty until he is taken off the street and educated first in a school for African children and then—once his talents are discovered—in a boarding school outside Johannesburg. Instrumental in this process is Adelaide Graham-Grigg, an Englishwoman whose main motivation in helping Praise is her conviction that African tribes need educated leaders to guide them through the upcoming postcolonial, democratic

48 Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 80.

49 Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 313.

50 Nadine Gordimer to Denver Lindley, 15 September 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

changes. With this goal in mind, she hands Praise over to Father Audry, an Anglican priest and a like-minded liberal in charge of the boarding school.

To some extent, the ambition and determination that drive Praise in his schoolwork come from Father Audry's influence. It can be argued that the relationship between them resembles that between a son and father. As is the case in Gordimer's prose in general, the figure of the father denotes an authority quite different from that represented by the mother: while the mother's influence on the child is exerted through gradual, everyday pressure to conform to a given set of principles, the influence of the father is based on his unquestioned authority, which gives him the power to shape the child through demands and prohibitions. There is something unsound, even sinister, in the close control that the man exercises over the boy: one scene shows Praise, alone in his room, distracted from his study by the thought that Father Audry may at any time visit him with a glass of milk: "When he did come, it was never actually so bad."[51] What follows is the description of Praise crying over his book, but no particular reason is offered other than that of the priest's visits. Other passages make it clear that the man's treatment of Praise is largely instrumental insofar as he sees the boy primarily as an outstanding representative of a larger group—"African boys of a lesser calibre"[52]—rather than as an individual.

As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the rationale for Praise's presence in the school is mainly to bring forth his uniqueness and, by doing so, to prove wrong the racist premises of segregated education. The bitter irony is that racist attitudes also permeate Father Audry's beliefs since he too sees most African boys as incapable of deeper and more creative thinking. This is visible in an episode in which Praise breaks down under the excessive pressure put upon him and reacts with a fit of panic. Seeing this reaction as "some frightening retrogression, a reversion to the subconscious,"[53] the priest begins to look upon his pupil as a representative of his race, immersed in an undefined collective memory in which he is a helpless participant. It is as if the

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51 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 15. Commenting on this episode, Gordimer argued that the hot milk brought by Father Audry represents "the Father's physical presence, symbolising to the boy the tremendous pressure that the white world is bringing to bear on him in order to help him make the best of himself in their terms.'" Gordimer to Lindley, 15 September 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

52 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 16.

53 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 17.

boy has suddenly failed to fulfil his promise of distinguishing himself in the group of Father Audry's African protégés and has regressed into becoming no more than a member of his tribe. This episode, focalized by the priest, is part of Gordimer's wider critique of the harmful isolationist policies of white educators: neither Adelaide Graham-Grigg nor Father Audry notices that their actions lead to increased fragmentation of the African tribes and to the social alienation of their younger members.[54] What the passage, in its larger context, also shows is the priest's failure to acknowledge his responsibility for Praise's breakdown: the reference to Jung seems like an attempt to obscure the truth about his harmful influence on the boy rather than a genuine explanation of the problem.

Gordimer shows not only the gaps in Father Audry's moral vision but, more importantly in this context, his incipient aggression towards Praise. A sudden insight into his motives yields the picture of the priest as a hunter—a parallel made explicit at the end of the story:

> He kept thinking how when the boy had backed away he had almost gone after him. The ugliness of the instinct repelled him; who would have thought how, at the mercy of the instinct to prey, the fox, the wild dog long for the innocence of the gentle rabbit, and the lamb. No one had shown fear of him ever before in his life. He had never given a thought to the people who were not like himself; those from whom others turn away. He felt at last a repugnant and resentful pity for them, the dripping-jawed hunters. (~~And why? Was it because he had to admit they might know him, after all~~?)[55]

The last, parenthetical comment, crossed out in the typescript, makes explicit the priest's intuitive insight that the feeling of pity may result from his newly discovered affinity with these hunters, first imagined as wild animals and only then as people. Interestingly, the hunters are viewed here as victims of their own instincts (they are "*at the mercy of* the instinct to prey"), as if this

54 One is reminded of Albert Memmi's contention that "the most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and from the community." Memmi, *Colonizer and Colonized*, 91.

55 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 17. The sentence in parentheses—crossed out—appears only in the manuscript.

impulse, however detestable it may be, was too strong to resist. While Father Audry recognizes this impulse in himself, he also dissociates himself from it; in other words, having projected it onto the purported motivations of the hunters, he distances himself from their actions and the emotions driving them (the feeling of pity points to a clear boundary between himself and these aggressors). Despite this attempted dissociation, Father Audry is affected by a vague feeling of guilt, which drives him to seek Praise after he runs away from the boarding school. As he writes in a letter to Adelaide Graham-Grigg, "... what worries me—I believe the boy may have been on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I am hunting everywhere . . . ."[56] The priest's reaction—first projecting his ambitions onto the boy, shaping him in accordance with his own preconceptions, and then trying to rectify his mistakes—puts him in the position of a pursuer. In this sense, his reaction is characteristic of the equivocal stance of the colonizer. In Gordimer's story, what binds the colonizers to the colonized is the desire to dominate them, followed by a suppressed feeling of guilt.

Like "The Pet," "Not for Publication" employs the marginalizing logic of a mismeeting, as discussed by Bauman.[57] It is significant that while the story clearly focuses on Praise, he only utters one sentence and two exclamations in the course of the entire story: the sentence can be found at the beginning of "Not for Publication," when—after being picked off the street by Adelaide Graham-Grigg—he explains to her what life on the street has taught him ("If you sit in the sun they don't give you anything"[58]), and the exclamations are located towards the end, when—intimidated by Father Audrey's presence—he cries out in a fit of hysteria "Sir—no. Sir—no,"[59] as if he was begging to be left alone by the priest. Paraphrasing Bauman's argument about the stranger as "an irrelevant presence,"[60] I would argue that Praise's presence is relevant only insofar as it serves as a convenient backdrop for Father Audry's liberal humanist beliefs. Gordimer shows that even this human-centred ethic, if adopted uncritically, can become a means of subordinating and instrumentalizing the Other.

56 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 18.

57 As Bauman writes, "The art of mismeeting, if mastered would relegate the other into the background; the other would be no more than a blot on the backcloth against which the action is set." Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 154.

58 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 3.

59 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 17.

60 Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 154.

The Late 1960s and the 1970s: Scrutinising the Attitudes of White South Africans

Gordimer's growing criticism of liberal humanism manifested itself in her exploration of the various ways in which socio-economic privilege shaped the attitude of entitlement among white South Africans. She addressed this concern in the lecture titled "What Being a South African Means to Me," delivered at the University of Cape Town in 1977. The lecture came one year after the Soweto Revolt and the year of Steve Biko's death, when the Black Consciousness Movement challenged white South Africans to redefine their role in the country. As Stephen Clingman points out, this was also the time when white South Africans, including Gordimer, considered the idea of white consciousness, seeing it not as a racist counterbalance to Black Consciousness but as "an attempt by whites to transcend the horizon of even an unwilling complicity in the patterns of supremacy by recognizing the real possibility of its existence."[61] This attempt is evident in Gordimer's lecture. Asked by the Student Representative Council to examine the concept of white consciousness, she pointed out that "if we are to try to discover if there is any validity in a concept of white consciousness, we have to examine how privilege subconsciously hampers the will to change."[62] She began this task from herself, posing the question about the extent to which "the lingering sloth of privilege"[63] had distorted her moral vision. Gordimer's stance of self-scrutiny, indicative of her decisive rejection of liberal humanism, was connected with the awareness that white South Africans would have to redefine their place in their country—indeed, redefine their identity. In order to achieve this task, "whites will have to take their attitudes apart and assemble afresh their ideas of themselves."[64]

Scrutinising the attitudes of her compatriots was Gordimer's preoccupation since the mid-1960s. Perhaps the best example of this is her collection *Livingstone's Companions* (1971), which, like no other before it, explores the sense of rootlessness and dislocation experienced by white South Africans. Describing the volume in a letter to her British publisher, Gordimer emphasized that what the majority of her characters in this collection have in common is the fact

61 Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 176.

62 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 280.

63 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 280.

64 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 282.

of being "Livingstone's companions"—a fact also shared by those white people who live or visit Africa: "We all are [Livingstone's companions], we who live in or travel to Africa, because he more than any other individual was responsible for bringing Africa and Europe into confrontation, and that confrontation is still being worked out, to this day."[65] Belonging to this group are the protagonists of the story "**Livingstone's Companions**" (*The Kenyon Review* (31.2), 1969; *Livingstone's Companions*, 1971), who live their lives in isolation from political events, hoping that they will find a way of continuing their insular existence. The owner and inhabitants of Gough's Bay Hotel, set in an unspecified country in central Africa, are surrounded quite literally by the remains of the colonial past: their hotel is situated not far from the ruins of a more imposing one, built in the colonial style by the former proprietor and the husband of the present owner. The history of this building remains unclear. As Carl Church, the protagonist and focalizer of the story, learns from the current owner, Mrs. Palmer, it was built after the war but fell into disrepair soon afterwards. There is the suggestion—made by Church—that it may have been deliberately pulled down, but the reasons for this remain unclear, as Mrs. Palmer is reluctant to explain this point. This seems a trifling detail, but it is significant insofar as it implies that there may have been a history of violence in this place, which Mrs. Palmer wishes to forget.

While the historical events in "Livingstone's Companions" (the emergence of a new postcolonial country on the ruins of its colonial past) are in the background of the story, there is still the sense that history is being made "out there" in the capital of the country, far away from Gough's Bay Hotel. The illusion entertained by Mrs. Palmer and by her son is that it is possible to lead an existence which is largely unaffected by historical events by adjusting to the changes brought about by the new decision-makers. Although Carl Church, as a confirmed liberal, can hardly share this stance, he does, to some extent, entertain the illusion of non-participation. Even though he is a journalist and a human rights activist who takes an interest in the future of the African country, he does not consider himself part of its history. As he finds himself by the lake discovered by Livingstone and his companions, he looks back upon the times of colonial exploitation that followed:

65 Nadine Gordimer to Alan D. Williams, 12 March 1971. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

> Twenty thousand slaves a year had passed this way, up the water. Slavers, missionaries, colonial servants—all had brought something and taken something away. He would have a beer and go, changing nothing, claiming nothing.[66]

There are two comments to be made on this important passage. Reading those three sentences in the context of Gordimer's earlier comment on the story, it can be argued that while Church may indeed feign to "claim nothing" of the colonial legacy of the country, it is the history of the country that claims him as a white Englishman and a descendant of colonial explorers. If the influence is there, then it is certainly unexamined insofar as Church, much like Toby Hood in *A World of Strangers*, considers himself a free agent, personally unaffected by the history of colonial exploitation and having no stake in the future of the country. His preoccupation with human rights is not rooted in a personal response to the injustices of the country; rather, it is a more general "desire to defend the rights of the individual of any colour or race,"[67] theoretical enough to allow him a sexist attitude towards the local women.[68]

The second comment on Church's illusion of non-involvement—of having no part in the history of colonial exploitation—should be made in the context of Livingstone's journal. Church reads fragments of this journal, opening it at random (perhaps an ironic reference to Crusoe looking for spiritual guidance in his Bible). These passages, interspersed throughout the story, create what Graham Huggan calls the "palimpsestic structure of [Gordimer's] short story narratives."[69] The fragments quoted constitute an ironic commentary on Church's attempt to retrace the steps of the first colonizers. To give one important example, immediately after reading a passage from the journal in which Livingstone states that one of the effects of long-term travel on "a man

66 Nadine Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 19.

67 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 7.

68 At the beginning of his journey, as he passes a native woman, he stops his car and is surprised when she declines his offer of money: "The women of that country had been on sale to white men for a number of generations. She refused. Why not?" Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 7.

69 Graham Huggan, "Echoes from Elsewhere: Gordimer's Short Stories as Social Critique," *Research in African Literatures* 25, no.1 (Spring 1994): 70, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3820037. Huggan also argues this point in the context of Gordimer's story "Six Feet of the Country."

whose heart is in the right place"[70] is to make him "more self-reliant,"[71] Church falls asleep and—on waking—finds himself confronted with a sudden sense of "helplessness," a "sort of hiatus [that] had opened up in the middle of a tour many times."[72] This feeling of helplessness, which recurs throughout the story, is connected with a confusion quite natural to any extended journey, but it is also more than that; later in the story, this feeling is referred to as "emptiness"[73] resulting from what seems an acute sense of temporal dislocation: "Was this how the first travellers had borne it, each day detached from the last and the next, taking each night that night's bearing by the stars?"[74]

The feeling of emptiness experienced by Church is closely connected with his experience of time during his stay in Gough's Bay Hotel. Throughout his time there, he is dogged by a feeling that he inhabits a kind of everlasting present, unconnected with the past and severed from the future; trying to overcome this feeling, he takes refuge in reading and in the pleasures of the stay (he joins the owner's son on fishing expeditions on the lake and takes a sensual delight in his daily swims), neither of which give him a sense of continuity. Church's sense of temporal dislocation is closely connected with his strategy of non-involvement: the fact that he views himself primarily as a sojourner in the African country (it is significant that he considers England and, specifically, London to be his home). What Church fails to see is that this attitude has led him to a feeling of rootlessness, in which he is neither particularly interested in the past (his haphazard reading of Livingstone's diary is mostly a way of passing the time) nor deeply preoccupied with the future of a country in which he is chiefly an observer.

The 1970s and the 1980s: Gordimer's Radicalization

By the time Gordimer published "Livingstone's Companions" and delivered the lecture "What Being a South African Means to Me" (1977), she had already committed herself to a more radical political stance (as she insisted in a 1974

70 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 22.

71 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 22.

72 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 22.

73 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 28.

74 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 28.

interview with Michael Ratcliffe, "I am a white South African radical)."[75] Her radicalism was evident in her increasingly critical stance towards liberal humanism—an important change that was inspired by the Black Consciousness Movement. The paternalistic stance of the white liberals and their dependence on economic privilege were two of the most important issues targeted by activists, thinkers, and writers belonging to or influenced by the Movement. As Clingman has shown, this critique can be observed in *The Conservationist* (1974) and only grows in intensity in the two novels that followed: *Burger's Daughter* (1979) and *July's People* (1981). In *July's People*, aptly called by Clingman a novel of the interregnum, Gordimer exposes the attitudes and beliefs resulting from the privileged economic and social position of white South Africans. In a powerful scene in the novel, Gordimer reverses one of the basic premises of white supremacy—the sole dominance of English in day-to-day interaction—by having July speak to his former employer, Maureen Smales, in his own language. As we learn, Maureen, having no command whatsoever of July's native tongue, "understood although she knew no word. Understood everything: what he had had to be, how she had covered up to herself for him, in order for him to be her idea of him."[76] While the meaning of July's words remains obscure, the true nature of their former mistress-servant relationship reveals itself in a moment of epiphanic understanding. The central element of this sudden self-realization undermines Maureen's former belief in respect based on shared understanding. The moment is also significant for July because—as Brendon Nicholls points out—it "frees July of Maureen's sentimental belief that she has some privileged understanding of him, and therefore a respectful relationship with him."[77]

July's People illustrates the conception of the writer that Gordimer developed in the late 1970s, whose role is to scrutinise "the lingering sloth of privilege"[78] that obscures the perception of white South Africans, standing in the way of social and political transformation. This goal also informed her activity as a short story writer, as I will show in the discussion of two stories published in the 1980s: "Blinder" and "What Were You Dreaming?" "**Blinder**" (*The Boston*

75 Qtd. in Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 145. The interview in question was published in *The Times* on 29 November 1974.

76 Nadine Gordimer, *July's People* (New York: Viking, 1981), 152.

77 Brendon Nicholls, *Nadine Gordimer's July's People* (London: Routledge, 2011), 31.

78 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 280.

Globe Magazine, 24 July 1983; *Something Out There*, 1984) concentrates on an episode in the life of a black servant Rose, plagued by her addiction to alcohol (the eponymous "blinder" is one of Rose's many drinking bouts) and stricken by the sudden death of her partner Ephraim.

Among the detailed but fragmentary information about Ephraim, one fact—mentioned in passing—makes it possible for us to situate "Blinder" in the context of South African history. As we learn, Ephraim was killed in an accident on his way to Umzimkulu, situated in what is now the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, to mediate in a conflict over land between his tribe and South African authorities. The ancestral land was divided and taken from the tribe as a result of the political transformations that had taken place in 1976: the emergence of Transkei, the first among the Bantustans.[79]

The relationship between Rose and Ephraim, described in its specificity,[80] is presented as highly typical of the bonds formed between black South Africans in cities, where men and women would forge new relationships and create together some form of family life. This insight into the life of black workers in major urban centres in South Africa is not imparted to us objectively but given in the context of the people in command of this knowledge: the white family for whom Rose works. In the following passage, illustrating the multivocal narration in the story, Gordimer enmeshes Rose's perspective with that of the family. Although sympathetic to Rose's loss, the general attitude of the family is that there is little that can be done for her since her life with Ephraim is all but "over":

> Ephraim has been buried already; it's all over. She has heard about his death only after he has been buried because she is not the one to be informed officially. He has—had, always had—a wife and children there where he came from, where he was going back to, when he was killed. Oh yes. Rose knows about that. The lady of the house, the family, know about that; it was the usual thing, a young man comes to work in a city, he spends his whole life there away from his home because he has to

79 Bantustans were self-governing territories, nominally independent from South Africa, to which much of the South African black population was relocated.

80 We are given some details about their domestic arrangements, for example, the fact that they lived together in Rose's servant quarters.

> earn money to send home, and so—the family in the house privately reasoned—his home really is the backyard where his town woman lives? As a socio-political concept the life is a paradigm (the grown child who is studying social science knows) of the break-up of families as a result of the migratory labour system. And that system (the one studying political science knows) ensures that blacks function as units of labour instead of living as men, with the right to bring their families to live in town with them.[81]

That this passage does not offer us a detached and objective narratorial perspective on Ephraim's death can be seen from the first sentence, which conveys an emotional response of Rose, the white family, or perhaps both. The question of attribution is not to be dismissed as a fine nuance; on the contrary, it is a strategy by which Gordimer involves her readers in the narrative by inviting them to listen and situate the various voices discussing Rose's life. Gordimer's strategy is to first offer a reflection and then suggest—by no means clearly— who may have formulated it. As we begin reading the passage, it seems that we are presented with the perspective of the person most afflicted by the situation: the second sentence, divided into two brief but powerful statements, conveys the grief of a person—most probably, Rose—who has been confronted with the finality of loss but has been denied any sense of closure, since "Ephraim has been buried already." After a glimpse into Rose's emotions, the perspective changes, as news about Ephraim's death is filtered through the perception of the white characters, who know well that despite her long relationship with Ephraim, Rose was "not the one to be informed officially," since she was not his wife. The brief comment on Ephraim that follows seems to be doubly mediated: one can imagine the family gathered around the table discussing the news of his death. The interjection "Oh yes," which marks a coming together of the two voices (that of Rose and that of the family), is an expression of a firm grasp on the realities of the situation: both the servant and her masters know all too well the dire consequences of the labour system for the lives of many black South Africans. Having said this, "Oh yes" conveys not only knowledge but also an attitude of solemn acceptance—a confrontation with an immutable fact that can only be discussed and acknowledged. What follows is a dissolution of the individual perspective, as the conversation drifts from Rose to embrace

81 Nadine Gordimer, *Something Out There* (London: Cape, 1984), 83–84.

all other black South Africans affected by this form of institutional racism. The target of irony is precisely this detached perspective, which creates the illusion that the people discussing it are not involved in this situation. Ultimately, Rose's voice is marginalized as the perspective of the family takes over and she becomes simply another topic to be mentioned at a dinner table.

It is significant that Gordimer attributes the knowledge about the functioning of the labour system primarily to the children of the white family. This happens at least twice in the story: once in the quoted passage ("the one studying political science knows") and once at the end ("The children have grown up so clever"). The unmistakeable irony in this latter reference emphasizes Gordimer's criticism of political passivity in the family and among like-minded South Africans. The whole scene is an illustration of a more recurrent theme in her stories: the ways in which attitudes of privilege and social detachment are perpetuated in families and social structures, in this case, the education system.

In the last scene of the story, the family's meal is interrupted by Rose, who introduces Ephraim's wife, come to the city to claim the pension after the death of her husband. The family responds to the woman's arrival with a combination of unease and silent hostility: their reaction is either reluctant politeness (on the part of the children) or thinly veiled impatience (on the part of their father). The white woman finds herself in the position of an intermediary whose role is to stage an interested and empathic response to the arrival of the Other so that the inconvenient situation is resolved as quickly as possible. In her article on feminism in Gordimer's stories, Karen Lazar describes this moment as "a brief moment of subversion,"[82] in which Rose, by virtue of being the interpreter of Ephraim's wife, has control over the terms of the exchange: "the white woman is uncomfortably cast into a position of temporary, atypical (and prophetic?) marginality, while the black women are drawn together in racial and economic identification."[83] Reading the following passage, it becomes clear that the white woman's reaction is not simply that of unease:

> Rose says something in their language and, after a pause, the woman suddenly begins to speak, turned to Rose but obviously addressing the

82 Karen Lazar, "Feminism as 'Piffling'? Ambiguities in Gordimer's Short Stories," in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, ed. Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1993), 221.

83 Karen Lazar, "Feminism as 'Piffling'?", 221.

faces at table through her, through the medium, the mediated of that beer-bloated body, that face ennobled with the bottle's mimesis of the lines and shadings of worldly wisdom.[84]

While the passage does not unambiguously attribute this insight to any character, it is more than probable that the passage is focalized by the white woman, who is clearly unnerved by the sudden reversal of power in her relationship with Rose. The references to Rose's drinking problems and to her weight show that the woman reacts with silent hostility. Pertinent in the discussion of this scene is Bauman's notion of the mismeeting. Bauman observes—referring to Georg Simmel—that the distance maintained by the subject with respect to the Other is motivated by intense, albeit suppressed, emotions and that these emotions function as defence mechanisms in the task of coexisting with strangers: "Repulsion and subdued hostility, controlled most of the time yet never fully eradicated and always ready to condense into hatred, make such living technically possible and psychologically bearable."[85] Since feelings of hostility have the effect of detaching the subject from strangers, mismeetings, writes Bauman, are only ever "episodes": "events without pre-history" and with no "aftermath." What Bauman calls "subdued hostility"[86] is in the context of "Blinder" a reaction to the loss of control over the situation—the sense that one no longer dictates the terms of the encounter.

Gordimer's critique of the attitudes of white South Africans, especially their passivity, based on the illusion of non-involvement, can also be observed in "**What Were You Dreaming?**" (*Granta 15*, 1985; *Jump*, 1991). Gordimer returns here to the theme of mismeetings between South Africans of different races with the aim of exploring the beliefs of white liberals. In the story, a coloured hitchhiker is offered a lift by a white South African woman and an Englishman on a visit to the country. With the hitchhiker dozing in the backseat, the woman takes this opportunity to discuss the social and economic realities that have shaped the life of their passenger.

"What Were You Dreaming?" is characterized by its use of space to signal the protagonists' self-enclosure in a convenient and self-serving fiction. The high-class car in which the white people are travelling is a symbol both of their

84 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 88.

85 Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 156.

86 Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 156.

privileged economic position and their separation from reality. As Kerry-Jane Wallart writes, "cars may encapsulate everything that was wrong about apartheid . . . . They represented the ability of whites to move around freely while non-whites were submitted to Pass Laws; they also symbolised white economic privilege, with the non-white population having to walk, or travel in the still omnipresent 'combis.'"[87] In the presence of the unnamed coloured hitchhiker, the luxurious car facilitates the illusion of understanding by creating "a moment like that on a no-man's-land bridge in which an accord between warring countries is signed—when there is no calling of names, and all belong in each other's presence."[88]

Recognising the anti-government stance of the white woman and noticing that he is treated as an example in a wider, anti-nationalist argument, the hitchhiker offers her and her companion a story of his life calculated to elicit their sympathy and correspond to their anti-apartheid sentiments. His story of suffering and destitution (eviction from his family house in Wynberg, Cape Town, and the ensuing poverty and illness) is taken up by the woman, who treats this as a basis for her lecture on the impact of apartheid on the black and coloured population. Some key acts of apartheid legislation are mentioned, among them the Group Areas Act of 1950 and the Bantu Resettlement Act of 1954, the latter of which led first to the removal of black South Africans from the suburbs of Johannesburg (a process that began in February 1955) and then to the relocation of coloured South Africans from District Six of Cape Town, followed by the destruction of their homes and the takeover of their land.[89] As Judie Newman points out, the woman carefully chooses her words to make the story palatable to her listener. For example, when asked by her companion about the coloured man's missing front teeth, she omits the topic of male prostitution, vaguely alluding to a "sexual myth."[90] As Newman writes of the

87 Kerry-Jane Wallart, "Failing to Place Confrontation: The Car as 'Void' in Jump," *Nadine Gordimer: De-Linking, Interrupting, Severing, Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 62, https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.413.

88 Nadine Gordimer, *Jump and Other Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 218.

89 As we read on the website of District Six Museum, "On 11 February 1966 it was declared a white area under the Group Areas Act of 1950, and by 1982, the life of the community was over. More than 60,000 people were forcibly removed to barren outlying areas aptly known as the Cape Flats, and their houses in District Six were flattened by bulldozers." https://www.districtsix.co.za/about-district-six/.

90 Gordimer, *Jump*, 223.

Englishman accompanying the woman, "Myth is what conditions his approach to South Africa, which sidesteps the ambiguities and unpleasant realities in a fable of the noble oppressed."[91]

The interaction between the woman and the hitchhiker can, to some degree, be described in terms of cooperation in that—as Newman writes—she "colludes with him"[92] to construct a conveniently edited narrative of his life, but it is also a powerful proof of her instrumental treatment of him since she is only interested in his story insofar as it supports a conveniently generalized vision of his life. It is also significant that she continues to speculate on the life of the hitchhiker after he has fallen asleep. Gordimer makes this painstakingly clear when she interjects the conversation between the woman and the Englishman with the comment: "Not a sound, not a sigh in sleep behind them. They can go on talking about him as he always has been discussed, there and yet not there."[93] The observation serves at least two purposes: it points to the long history of the disempowerment of the black and coloured population, and it ironically shows that the white woman does not even need the input of the hitchhiker to tell his story. There is the sense that she is enjoying the authority of guiding her companion through the intricacies of the socio-political situation in the country and does not require any help from the person directly affected by the injustices of apartheid.

"What Were You Dreaming?" ends with what seems to be a gesture of goodwill: when the hitchhiker exits the car, the woman hands him a two-rand note. As the doors are shut and the woman is once again alone with her visitor, she feels compelled to follow the gesture with a comment, because "she's the one—she knows that too—who is accountable. She must be the first to speak again."[94] The money is, of course, tangible help, but it is also an attempt to terminate the exchange by bringing about a sense of closure. In this sense, the end is reminiscent of the early story "Ah, Woe is Me" (*Friday's Footprint*, 1949), in which an encounter between a white woman and an impoverished black girl ends with the former handing the latter a handkerchief to wipe her tears—a token not only of helplessness but also of a thinly veiled indifference towards the fate of

91 Judie Newman, "Jump Starts: Nadine Gordimer After Apartheid," in *Apartheid Narratives*, ed. Nahem Yousaf (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 111.

92 Newman, "Jump Starts," 111.

93 Gordimer, *Jump*, 222.

94 Gordimer, *Jump*, 225.

the girl and her ailing mother. In "What Were You Dreaming?" the gesture of giving money does not successfully end the episode, as there remains a feeling of unease, which is identified in the second sentence of the quoted passage. The word "accountable" suddenly switches the perspective from the story told by the woman (her "account" of the man's life in the wider socio-political context) to her "accountability," in other words, her role in the story. What the scene shows is the act of disclaiming responsibility by absolving oneself of one's inescapable involvement in a hegemonic social system. The false premise of the woman's argument is that she is somehow separate from the reality she is describing to her companion.

"What Were You Dreaming?" describes a mismeeting, whose aim is—in Bauman's words—to "relegate the other into the background" and turn him or her into "an irrelevant presence," "a non-being being.[95]" By enacting the mismeeting between the two white passengers and their coloured hitchhiker, Gordimer illustrates the instrumental use of the Other and shows that unexamined liberal attitudes can function as a smoke-screen—self-congratulatory fictions which are used to obscure the more nuanced social and political reality.

Storytelling after Apartheid: "Mission Statement"

Both in the period of transition from apartheid to democracy and in the years following this political transformation, Gordimer's writing continued to be shaped by her conviction that the artistic and the political value of literature lies in exploring the experiential, dynamic, and fragmentary truth about human beings. It is noteworthy that she decided to preface her eleventh novel *None to Accompany Me* (1994), written in the times of democratic transition in South Africa, with a quotation from Marcel Proust's letter to Ernst Robert Curtius: "We must never be afraid to go too far, for truth lies beyond." In the letter, Proust precedes this statement with a sentence which is also worthwhile to include here: "True [literature] brings out what is hidden in our souls. One must not be afraid of going too far, because the truth lies beyond."[96] Proust's notion of writing as bringing to light that which lies hidden no doubt appealed to Gordimer. In the lecture "Adam's Rib: Fictions and Realities" (1994), she argued that

95 Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 154.

96 Cyril Grunspan, *Marcel Proust: Conceal Nothing*, trans. Matthew Escobar (Rome: Portaparole, 2005), 17–18.

writers are capable of viewing the features that remain deeply hidden within a person, which she called "a series of intimations the individual does not present to the ordinary mirror of the world."[97] In Gordimer's view, writers remain sensitive to those flashes, retaining them for use in their fiction. As she went on to argue, it is important for writers to stay alert to those subtle glimpses into the individual psyche, using them to create nuanced psychological portraits of their protagonists: "For one of the few sure things the writer knows is that inconsistency is the consistency of human character."[98]

Gordimer explored the complex and contradictory nature of human motivations and actions from her early works, in which she exposed the self-delusions of white Africans who cling to the old order despite approaching change. Gordimer's interest in the complexities of human character is also visible in her post-apartheid stories, for example in "**Mission Statement**," published in *Loot and Other Stories* (2003). "Mission Statement" tells the story of Roberta Blayne, an assistant to the director of an international aid organization, who is sent to an African country as part of a team implementing a programme intended to help the country in its transition from a colonial nation into a democratic state, attuned to the demands of globalized economies. In the course of her duties, Roberta meets Gladwell Shadrack Chabruma, the Deputy-Director-General of the Ministry of Land Affairs, and the two enter into a clandestine relationship. Asked by Chabruma to become his second wife, Roberta turns down the proposal and leaves the country.

"Mission Statement" has a cyclical construction, which is built on the logic of return. This becomes clear relatively late in the story, when Roberta realizes that the place of colonial exploitation she has just visited (the ruins of a copper mine in an unnamed African country) was once owned by her grandfather. For Roberta, this discovery is a pivotal moment which brings forth memories of her childhood, when during family gatherings she learned about her grandfather's racism and his exploitation of black workers:

> Been here before.
> Not in her person. But in her blood-line. The history to which she belongs. There it was—is—Buffalo Mine.[99]

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97 Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, 5.

98 Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, 6.

99 Nadine Gordimer, *Loot and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 42.

The free indirect discourse blends the perspective of the character and that of the narrator, so that it is unclear whether the second, third, and fourth sentences are focalized by Roberta or whether they constitute the narrator's commentary, providing insight into the character's mind. The interplay between focalized narrative and narratorial commentary reveals Roberta's attitude towards the past to be ambiguous and problematic. This is shown also in the sudden switch from the past to the present tense ("was–is"), as if Roberta was quick to correct herself—if only in the privacy of her thoughts—so as not to forget about the lasting legacy of the past and its effect on the present. Pertinent here is Vivek Santayana's observation about the complex temporality of Gordimer's late fiction, which alternates between the past, the present, and the future. As Santayana observes, "the post-apartheid present that the stories describe is overlaid with the legacies of the past as well as the uncertain and conflicted future."[100] What is clear in "Mission Statement" is Roberta's imperative to confront the past now that it has resurfaced in her memory as a result of visiting the disused Buffalo Mine, once administered by her ancestor. Her actions are informed by a sense of responsibility for the colonial past of her family (she certainly feels part of this painful legacy), as well as the hope that her work for the agency will lead to the lifting of this burden—a kind of gradual erasure of the past.

As their relationship develops, Roberta feels keenly the need to reveal the secret about her family's history. Viewing Gladwell's impressive farm, she feels confident that this revelation will be met with understanding and forgiveness:

> the present moment would grow over the past safely, organically, as the maize and blood-bright peppers and the russet and white pattern of the distant cattle repossessed the land that was colonial booty.[101]

The exploitation of the mines for profit is contrasted with the cultivation of the land; in Roberta's eyes, the aesthetic beauty of the farmed fields, when juxtaposed with the barren and disused fields of colonial times, becomes a further proof of development. Viewing farming as the reclamation of the land

100 Vivek Santayana, "By 'the Flash of the Fireflies: Multi-Focal Forms of Critique in Nadine Gordimer's Late Short Story," *Nadine Gordimer: De-Linking, Interrupting, Severing, Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 94, https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.413.

101 Gordimer, *Loot*, 45.

becomes a metaphoric expression of Roberta's hope that the past will be gradually erased—"grown over"—by the present.

Roberta's optimistic representation of historical change in terms of a harmonious passage of time cannot be neatly reconciled with her desire to cut herself off from her past and forget about it altogether. When she confesses her family's history to her lover, she is first overcome with grief and then—when encouraged by Chabruma to distance herself from her colonial legacy—takes his advice as a token of their shared understanding that their relationship is free of any attachments to the past. That she is seriously mistaken in this assumption can be seen at the end of the story, when Chabruma—following the tradition of African polygamous marriages—asks her to be his second wife.[102] Although Roberta admits this neither to Gladwell nor to her friends at the agency, she is shocked by the proposal, considering it as "offensive, surely to him as to her."[103] Characteristic of her attempts to "mine for the unexpressed in human motivation,"[104] Gordimer brings to the readers' attention—not without a degree of irony—the uncomfortable position in which Roberta has found herself, repelled by the prospect of becoming Gladwell's second wife, yet unable to express her opinion out of feigned respect for the traditions of his country. As we learn towards the end of the story, the breakdown of understanding between her and Gladwell leads to the feeling of disdain, resulting from the unexpressed conviction that she has been offended—albeit unintentionally—by her lover: "And now she was primly struggling to conceal how she disdained him for expecting to accept something he chose from his past."[105] It is not unlikely that Roberta's intense dislike is, at least partly, a projection of her guilt resulting from the fact that while Gladwell did not see the colonial past of her ancestors as a stumbling block in their relationships, she was not ready to accept his social and cultural legacy.

Unable to communicate her decision to Gladwell openly, Roberta informs him of her decision to leave the country. Ileana Dimitriu comments that "the

102 Ileana Dimitriu rightly observes that "Gordimer subtly mocks Gladwell's opportunistic invoking of polygamous traditions, when his lifestyle is western." Ileana Dimitriu, "Shifts in Gordimer's Recent Short Fiction: Story-Telling after Apartheid," *Current Writing* 17, no. 1 (2005): 100, https://doi.org/10.1080/1013929X.2005.9678208.

103 Gordimer, *Loot*, 65.

104 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 550.

105 Gordimer, *Loot*, 65.

burdens of an overdetermined place are too painful for her, and so she chooses to give up her quest for belonging and return to the no-man's-land of the global aid-workers."[106] I would argue that Roberta's life has little to do with a quest for belonging: she is neither attached to any place in particular nor does she seek this kind of sentiment. In fact, it seems that the kind of rootless life she is leading, forever in transit from one country to the next, is well suited to her temperament. Roberta never leaves "the no-man's-land of the global aid-workers"; hers is a motivation that is not place-specific, which can be described as global in its scope. It is her desire to lead what is an essentially rootless life, unaffected by the values of the countries for which she works, that results in the failure of her relationship with Gladwell.

While the relationship between Roberta and Blackwell does not have all the traits of the mismeeting as defined by Bauman, it is characterised by the instrumental treatment of the Other, which becomes more apparent towards the end of the story, as Roberta welcomes his acceptance of her colonial past but refuses to accept his historical legacy. The fact that Roberta, despite her political ideals and goodwill, only manages to meet Gladwell on her own terms can be considered in the context of Bauman's mismeeting, which, as he showed, is an encounter wholly controlled by the subject: "I myself set the limits to which I would go."[107]

Conclusion: Challenging the System

As I observed at the beginning of this chapter, Gordimer viewed her fiction as "an enactment of life."[108] In this conception of literature, the role of fiction is to convey the truth about people living at a given point in time—in Gordimer's case, apartheid and the years following its collapse. In her description of various mismeetings between white, black, and coloured South Africans, her focus is mostly on the attitudes and beliefs of white protagonists, who are often described as people in conflict, torn between their refusal to accept the injustices of apartheid and their attachment to the comfortable lifestyle offered to them as benefactors of this system. Having rejected the option of challenging the

106 Ileana Dimitriu, "Shifts in Gordimer's Recent Fiction," 100.

107 Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, 156.

108 Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, 18.

unjust social order, for example by violent action (few protagonists of Gordimer's stories are radicals in this sense[109]), they hope to find for themselves a third way—a life that would not force them to upset their economic status quo but at the same time would not be a life lived in indifference towards the underprivileged. Where concern for the victims of the system is a superficial strategy of alleviating white guilt, Gordimer exposes this stance with authorial irony, criticising the passivity of white, middle-class South Africans.

Significantly, even those stories by Gordimer whose white characters show a genuine need to care for the Other offer no solution to the social and economic problems described; on the contrary, beginning with the stories published in the 1960s, Gordimer conveyed her belief that no response within the existing structures would be tenable. This pessimism can be considered as an expression of Gordimer's radical stance, and the same can be said of her tendency to distance herself from her white characters, including those who express values close to hers, like the woman in "What Were You Dreaming?" Indeed, in her stories published in the 1970 and the 1980s, Gordimer anticipated a time when apartheid would be overthrown, forcing white South Africans to redefine themselves (already in the 1970s she was of the opinion that white South Africans should change the conception of who they were in order to prepare themselves for a new future that lay ahead of the country). Gordimer strongly believed that she could participate in this process by exploring the attitudes and actions of her protagonists and by pursuing the experiential, dynamic, and elusive truth about human motivations.

Looking at her works in the context of her life, it can be argued that writing was for Gordimer a means of rediscovering herself—in other words, of shaping her political and artistic beliefs, so that they constituted an adequate response to the changing conditions of her country. The path of her development as a writer—her gradual rejection of liberal humanism, her political radicalization, and the concomitant decision to embrace a politically committed conception of writing—was explored in this chapter in the context of interracial relationships. As I have shown, Gordimer's stories give us insight into the impact of social and political changes on individual lives, described succinctly by her as

109 Those who can be characterized as radicals, for example the protagonists of Gordimer's story "Some Monday for Sure" and her novella "Something Out There," will be mentioned in Chapter Three.

"the things that politics do to people, in this country."[110] The discussion of this topic in her works will not be complete unless we consider her protagonists' responses to the events in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, concentrating on those characters' social and political involvement. This topic will be addressed in the next chapter of this book.

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110 Gordimer to Angell, 1 May 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

Chapter Three

"Offering One's Self": Political Commitment

"How To Offer One's Self": Gordimer's Political Commitment as a Writer

In her autobiographical essay "A Bolter and the Invincible Summer" (1963), Nadine Gordimer describes the beginnings of her writing career. Mentioning her "first story about adults,"[1] "Come Again Tomorrow," published at the age of fifteen, she then enumerates the authors (Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, Pauline Smith, William Plomer, and others) who were particularly important to her as a young writer. It was her extensive reading, she suggests, that led her to notice the imperfections of her early short stories. She then adds: "In a fumbling way . . . I was looking for what people meant but didn't say, not only about sex, but also about politics and their relationship with the black people among whom we lived as people live in a forest among trees."[2] While Chapter Two covered the topic of interracial relationships outside of the context of political commitment, this chapter will focus on politics, especially the various ways in which Gordimer's characters actively respond to the injustices of apartheid.

The stories discussed in this chapter can be viewed as reflections on the topic of "how to offer *one's self*"[3]—a question posed in Gordimer's lecture "Living in the Interregnum," delivered in 1982, which occupied her throughout her career. The general framework of this chapter will be similar to that of Chapter Two, showing Gordimer's progression from her liberal humanist stance[4]

1 Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, ed. Stephen Clingman (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 25.

2 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 25–26.

3 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 264.

4 Gordimer's involvement with liberal humanism can be seen in the following stories: "The Amateurs" (*Common Sense* (9.12), 1948; *Face to Face*, 1949), "Another Part of the Sky"

to one characterized by more radical social and political demands.[5] I will argue that with her growing radicalization, she began to concentrate on the activism of black and coloured South Africans.[6] This tendency can be read as an expression of her belief—clearly stated in a 1983 interview by Diana Cooper-Clarke—that she was entitled to write from the perspective of non-white characters.[7] More importantly, Gordimer's increasing focus on the political commitment of black and coloured activists, evident in her stories from the 1960s, pointed to her growing belief that it was this group that constituted the most important driving force in anti-apartheid struggle, while their white compatriots could only adopt a subsidiary role, hoping that their contribution would ultimately be accepted.[8]

Essential to Gordimer's political and artistic development is the conception of the artist as "an agent of change,"[9] whose role is to participate in social and

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(*The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952), "Which New Era Would That Be?" (*The New Yorker*, 9 July 1955; *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956), and "The Smell of Death and Flowers" (*The New Yorker*, 15 May 1954; *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956).

5 Beginning with the 1960s, Gordimer described various forms of opposition against apartheid, ranging from organizing and participating in protests (e.g., in "A Chip of Glass Ruby" (*Contrast* (1.1), 1960; *The Atlantic*, February 1961; *Not for Publication*, 1965) and "Something for the Time Being" (*The New Yorker*, 9 January 1960; *Not for Publication*, 1965)) to radical activism, as explored in "Some Monday for Sure" (*Transition* (4.18) 1965; *Not for Publication*, 1965), "A City of the Dead, A City of the Living" (*The New Yorker*, 5 April 1982; *Something Out There*, 1984), "Something Out There" (*Salmagundi* (62), 1984; *Something Out There*, 1984), "Safe Houses" (*Jump*, 1991), and "Comrades" (*Jump*, 1991). Among other notable stories about political involvement are "Home" (*The New Yorker*, April 25, 1988; *Jump*, 1991) and "Amnesty" (*The New Yorker*, 27 August 1990; *Jump*, 1991).

6 Most stories mentioned above—with the exception of "Something Out There" and "Safe Houses"—are solely devoted to the activism of black and coloured South Africans.

7 In an interview by Diana Cooper-Clark (1983), Gordimer argued: "I think I have arrived at a stage through my work where if I write about blacks or I create black characters, I feel I have the right to do so. I know enough to do so. I accept the limitations of what I know." Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 223.

8 Beginning with the late 1950s, Gordimer argued that it was black South Africans who would have a decisive role in the shaping of the country's future political destiny after the fall of apartheid (see her lecture "Where do Whites Fit In?" (1959)). In 1976—the year of the Soweto Revolt—Gordimer fully realized that non-white South Africans, both young and adult, would have unquestioned leadership in this struggle (see "Letter from Johannesburg" (1976)).

9 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 142. For a more detailed see Chapter One, especially the section "Embracing change."

political transformation by exploring the attitudes of people living in a given historical period. While this conception of the artist was developed by Gordimer in the late 1970s, her entire career was defined by the conviction that fiction should be "an enactment of life"[10]; in other words, it should give insight into the actions and motivations of the people described. What is more—as I argue throughout this book—Gordimer strongly believed that if her fiction was to be of any political significance, it should convey the experiential truth about people living in her times—in the case of this chapter, people who have decided to respond actively to the injustices of apartheid, embracing the rewards of a politically committed life and accepting its consequences.

The 1950s: Liberal Humanism in Gordimer's Early Stories

The late 1940s and early 1950s were for Gordimer and many of her contemporaries an optimistic time, in which the liberal humanist belief in the value of cross-racial understanding went hand in hand with the conviction that cooperation between different races and social groups would lead to the inevitable demise of apartheid. Among the leading writers and political figures of the time who held this belief was Alan Paton, one of South Africa's most renowned writers and the co-founder of the Liberal Party of South Africa. In 1973, Paton described liberalism in the following way: "By liberalism I don't mean the creed of any party or any century. I mean a generosity of spirit, a tolerance of others, an attempt to comprehend otherness, a commitment to the rule of law, a high ideal of the worth and dignity of man, a repugnance for authoritarianism and a love of freedom."[11] Two characteristics of liberalism, as enumerated by Paton, are especially significant in describing Gordimer's stance in the 1940s and the 1950s: a strong belief in the dignity of man, irrespective of race and class, and the conviction that otherness can be comprehended through meaningful acts of communication.

It is worthwhile to note that Paton exerted considerable influence both on Gordimer and her contemporaries, especially in the 1950s and the 1960s. In one of her interviews, looking back upon the writers of the post-war generation, Gordimer began by mentioning Alan Paton as the first representative of "a new

10 Nadine Gordimer, *Writing and Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 18.

11 Qtd. in Peter Blair, "The Liberal Tradition in Fiction," in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, ed. David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 475.

wave of writers,"[12] in which she also included herself, Dan Jacobson, Jack Cope, Jan Rabie, Athol Fugard, and others. While Paton's most famous book is his novel *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1949), it is his collection of short stories, *Debbie Go Home*, published in 1961 (and reprinted in the United States as *Tales from a Troubled Land*), that will be more relevant in this discussion.

Paton's short stories, similarly to his novels, are informed by the principles of literary realism, focusing on a detailed description of the social problems of his home country, among them, the discrimination against Africans, poverty and violence in black neighbourhoods, and the harmful impact of apartheid legislation. One story in his 1961 collection *Debbie Go Home*—"The Worst Thing of His Life"—is especially worthwhile to mention because of its similarity with Gordimer's "**Another Part of the Sky**" (*The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952). In fact, both Paton's "The Worst Thing of His Life" and Gordimer's "Another Part of the Sky" were inspired by the same anecdote about a boy who escaped from a reformatory, told by Paton in 1951.[13] Most importantly—and this is the reason why they are discussed here—both stories concentrate on the social commitment of their main protagonist, the principal of a reformatory for black and coloured delinquents. Paton's and Gordimer's stories focus on an episode in the life of the reformatory: the absconding of a young African boy and the principal's fears that during his escape to the city, he might have committed a crime. Although the boy's flight cannot be blamed on the principal, since it was not due to his overlook that he left the institution (designed not as a prison but as an open house, which some of its inmates can leave of their own will), the man feels personally responsible for the welfare of the boy and deeply fears for his future.

Unlike "The Worst Thing of His Life," which is narrated in the first person, Gordimer's "Another Part of the Sky" is a third-person narrative, presenting a more detached perspective than that offered by Paton in his story. Gordimer focuses on the doubts and fears of the principal by the name of Collins, described in the newspapers as "the man who pulled down prison walls and grew geraniums in their place."[14] The story is part of her wider

12 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 51.

13 The episode is described by Ronald Suresh Roberts. See: Ronald Suresh Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen: A Biography of Nadine Gordimer* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2005), 90–91.

14 Nadine Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent and Other Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), 144.

goal to "peel off the labels,"[15] in other words to probe deeper into a widely accepted perception of a particular person—in this case, an idealized image of a man committed to helping others. As we learn, Collins himself rejects his own simplified image as an idealist, considering newspaper articles as distortions of the truth about him. Speaking through Collins, Gordimer offers a comment on writing in general: "Whenever things are written down they go wrong. Mistakes are the least part of it; by the time they are stamped in print, words have spilt meaning and whatever of truth they have managed to scoop up."[16] This comment, made at the beginning of the story, has a self-reflexive role insofar as it pre-conditions the readers' perception of the text by raising their suspiciousness as to the authority of the written word. Gordimer is implying that her aim is to undermine a certain simplified image of her protagonist and decisively reject the glib rhetoric of the newspapers in an attempt to seek a language capable of conveying the dynamic and subjective truth about Collins. This self-reflexive comment is significant for two reasons: first of all, it situates Gordimer's early short prose in the context of "short-lived"[17] "African modernism"[18] of the 1950s; secondly, it shows that the surface-depth binary that Gordimer used throughout her life[19] to contrast literature with reportage informed her thinking even at this early stage of her writing career.

"Another Part of the Sky" combines a detailed insight into the thoughts of the protagonist—the recurrent rhetorical questions, expressing Collins's fears and doubts concerning his missing protégé—with a detailed relation of his actions, such as the expectant pacing down the hall of his house, a visit to a bedroom in which his wife lies awake, sharing his apprehensions, and his attempts

15 This comment is taken from Gordimer to Angell, 1 May 1964. Gordimer's correspondence with Angell is discussed in detail in Chapter One.

16 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 144.

17 Dorothy Driver, "The Fabulous Fifties," in *The Cambridge History of South African Literature*, ed. David Attwell and Derek Attridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 389. What makes the story modernist in the sense that Driver defines it is its self-consciousness, as well as its psychologically nuanced portrayal of the protagonist. For a more detailed discussion of African modernism, see Chapter One.

18 Driver, "The Fabulous Fifties," 389.

19 She used the surface-depth binary in a number of non-fiction texts, including her letter to Roger Angell (1 May 1964), her interview by Melvyn Bragg (1976), and two of her lectures: "Adam's Rib: Fictions and Realities" (1994) and "Witness: The Inward Testimony" (2006).

to fall asleep beside her. Rather than making the narrative mundane, the relation aptly punctuates moments of psychological insight and increases the state of nervous expectation shared by the readers. With the use of detailed imagery based on trivial objects of everyday use (the man's towel, his wife's stockings), Gordimer describes a seemingly unremarkable scene from their life, which is nevertheless of considerable importance to both protagonists. Nervousness and apprehension are clearly felt in the following passage, which describes the reaction of Collins's unnamed wife: "She was awake and worrying. Her hands did the things they had always done in an unconscious effort to keep one sane and quiet reassurance, the safety of commonplace."[20] Yet, it is commonplace in which the fears of uncertain future, as well as a sense of alienation, are born: the comforting rituals described are only a way of blocking the protagonists' frustrations and fears. As is the case with Gordimer's early stories, the tranquil reality of the quotidian is only a painstaking human construct; in reality, the fabric of everyday life is constantly torn by the unexpected and the unknown.

Gordimer's strong emphasis on details, evident in her description of Collins's life, can be viewed as a distinctive feature of her early writing. In her 1982 interview with Robert Boyers, Clark Blaise, Terence Diggory, and Jordan Elgrably, she observed that "It's *significant* detail that brings any imaginative work alive, whatever the medium,"[21] adding that the ability to convey this significant detail could be observed in her early writing: "When I look at my early stories, there's a freshness about them, there's a sensuous sensibility that I think you only have when you're very young."[22] Gordimer's close attention to detail stemmed from her concentration on the present moment—what she called "a discrete moment of truth"[23]; as such, her focus on detail can be considered a modernist characteristic of her works. Another modernist feature, which distinguishes Gordimer's story from Paton's, is her use of epiphany. What in Paton's story is only a distant realization (the fact of the protagonist's relief on hearing the news from his assistant), in Gordimer's story becomes the central revelation—an epiphany concerning Collins's relationship with his wife. Unable to communicate directly, they only read their

20 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 149.

21 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 195.

22 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 195.

23 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 169–170. The words are taken from her essay "The Short Story in South Africa" (1968), which is discussed in detail in Chapter One.

emotions from subtle signals that they have learned to interpret for themselves in their shared life:

> But they did not speak. They would never speak. Somewhere below the face of the boy, a pang which had never yet found the right moment to claim attention lifted feebly like an eye of lightning that opens and shuts another part of the sky. When would there be time to speak to her, to read the face of his wife as he struggled to read the suffering faces of the nameless, the dispossessed whom God made it incumbent upon him that he should spend his life reading?[24]

The passage concentrates on Collins's suppressed realization that emerges suddenly, "like an eye of lightning," and just as suddenly disappears, leaving in its wake the awareness of a topic on the peripheries of his vision, much like the silent presence of another, dark part of the sky. Collins's failure to "read the face of his wife," hidden in the darkness of their room, is a transgression of his ultimate, God-imposed duty to read the faces of those in need. Reading, understood as a metaphor not only of understanding but also of dedication to the other, comes at a price because "if you search one face, your turn your back on another."[25] The silence between the husband and the wife that concludes the story has its roots in Collins's sense of failure his acute awareness that in helping his protégés, he has turned his back on his wife—and the guilt that stems from this realization. Guilt is not the only emotion that permeates the darkness of the eponymous another part of the sky: also present in the story are the unexpressed emotions of love, sadness, and apprehension.

"Another Part of the Sky" clearly illustrates Gordimer's belief in liberal humanism, which she held throughout the 1950s. This is evident from the fact that Collins, who embodies all the values of liberal humanism enumerated by Paton, is presented as an unambiguously positive protagonist; indeed, even the guilt that plagues him in the story is a token of his dedication to other people. What also conveys Gordimer's liberal humanism is the focus on the power of the individual to effect positive change in the lives of others without openly challenging the existing political order; it is significant that Collins's

24 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 150.

25 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 155.

stance is essentially apolitical insofar as his focus is solely on helping others within the Christian ethic that he has adopted. Despite Gordimer's atheism, this ethic, which informed Paton's life, is presented as a demanding but relevant response to social evil.

In an interview by Jannika Hurwitt conducted in 1979 and 1980, Gordimer described the liberal humanist stance as "the humanist approach, the individualistic approach," adding retrospectively, "I felt that all I needed, in my own behavior was to ignore and defy the color bar."[26] One story that conveys Gordimer's emphasis on individual freedom through opposition to social injustice is "**The Smell of Death and Flowers**" (*The New Yorker*, 15 May 1954; *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956). "The Smell of Death and Flowers" recreates the excitement and optimism of the 1950s, including the "tremendous, memorable parties"[27] that Gordimer recalled—with some nostalgia—in the 1980s. Indeed, to read the story is to enter into the atmosphere of a bustling group of young people, spending nighttime hours partying and socializing with those whom they would otherwise never have met. Evident in the story is "the mood of discovery, for whites, of the black social world around them."[28] This neat characterization is taken from Stephen Clingman's discussion of Gordimer's second novel *A World of Strangers* (1958). Published four years after "The Smell of Death and Flowers," *A World of Strangers* gives us an evocative description of the bustling parties of the 1950s, which Toby Hood, the Englishman who narrates this novel, refers to as "remarkable": "The ordinary social pattern seemed as intricate and ambiguous in its composition as the Oriental rug."[29] Despite the variety of people of all races and from many walks of life, a vague sense of shared values and goals permeates this atmosphere, as fragmentary exchanges of political opinions are heard over the loud music. What Gordimer enacts in "The Smell of Death and Flowers" is a world of its own created through social interaction. In one such instance, a "pretty brunette" explains to a young man by the name of Malcolm Barker the principles of a defiance campaign, but she is interrupted as "a black hand came out from the crush of dancers bumping

26 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 135.

27 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 250.

28 Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 53.

29 Nadine Gordimer, *A World of Strangers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), 85.

round and pulled the woman to her feet."[30] As she joins the crowd of dancers, the discussion is suddenly suspended:

> The ginger-whiskered man got up without a word and went swiftly through the dancers to the "bar," a kitchen table covered with beer and gin bottles, at the other end of the small room.
> "*Satyagraha*," said Malcolm Barker, like the infidel pronouncing with satisfaction the holy word that the believers hesitate to defile.[31]

Easy to overlook in the dense, descriptive passages of Gordimer's early prose, the concept of *satyagraha* is central to the story. Conceived by Mahatma Gandhi in 1906 as a response to the discrimination of Asians in South Africa, *satyagraha* (the term, derived from Sanskrit and Hindi, can be translated as "holding onto truth")[32] describes the stance of non-violent resistance to social evil. While this notion is too complex to be discussed here at length, what is important is its emphasis on the complete rejection of violence through peaceful campaigning, with the acceptance of all its consequences, including imprisonment and persecution. In this sense, imprisonment is a manifestation of a deep belief in one's convictions and the willingness to stand by them in times of adversity. Widely accepted by the anti-apartheid opposition, including the African National Congress,[33] this principle is explained to Malcolm Barker—

30 Nadine Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country: Fifteen Short Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 216.

31 Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country*, 216.

32 *The New Yorker* edition of the story substitutes the concept of *satyagraha* with "passive resistance," thus losing the Gandhian context. See: Nadine Gordimer, "The Smell of Death and Flowers," *New Yorker,* May 15, 1954, 34.

33 In 1949, the ANC implemented the "Programme of Action," whose objective was explained by Nelson Mandela in the following words: "We explained that we thought the time had come for mass action along the lines of Gandhi's non-violent protests in India and the 1946 passive resistance campaign." Qtd. in Nelson Mandela, *No Easy Walk to Freedom: Speeches, Letters and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), 57. Mandela changed his attitude towards peaceful resistance in 1953, when he began to argue that violence may be a necessary step to fight with apartheid. It is noteworthy that Gordimer considered Gandhi's philosophy as a foundation for social action both in the 1950s and in the decades that followed. In her 1995 Jawaharlal Memorial Lecture, she mentioned two crucial influences on the liberation movement in South Africa: communism, with its insights into the economic and social bases of racial injustice, and Gandhi's notion of *satyagraha.*

unnecessarily, it seems, because Barker knows the Gandhian foundations of protests and defiance campaigns.

What Barker knows theoretically, his twenty-two-year-old sister-in-law, Joyce McCoy, learns in practice. Joyce, the main protagonist of the story, is a South African who has spent the last several years in England and so is a newcomer to the group. A fascinated observer at first, she is enamoured by the people present, especially the anti-apartheid activist Jessica Malherbe. With the keen eye for detail that characterizes her early stories, Gordimer explores Joyce's state of mind as she toys with the idea of introducing herself to Jessica and her husband. Having scant experience of meeting other racial groups, Joyce falls back on her memories to give herself the context she needs for social interaction. Told by one of the party guests that Jessica's husband is Indian, Joyce conjures up her childhood memory of visiting a shop in the Indian quarter of her town. The smell of incense pervading the shop is, in turn, connected with the memory of her grandfather's funeral, from which Joyce remembers "the smell of death and flowers," "of ugliness and beauty, of attraction and repulsion."[34] The juxtaposition of life and death, the beautiful and the repulsive, is reminiscent of Mansfield's philosophy of writing as conveying what she called "the diversity of life,"[35] but it is also written in a style that is distinctive of Gordimer's early writing, with its emphasis on sensual detail—in this case, the olfactory imprint of Joyce's childhood memory.

The passages describing Joyce's state of mind show Gordimer's interest in the question of causality connected with memories and their triggers. What we learn from the quoted paragraph is that a particular scent of flowers has the potency to evoke a combination of fear and fascination in Joyce's mind. That the reverse is also true can be seen in a later episode, in which Joyce, who is about to take part in a protest organized by the Civil Disobedience Campaign, meets other participants in a small flat, where they are supposed to discuss details of the event. As Joyce's nervousness grows, she begins to view the room with a combination of fascination and repulsion that she associated with her grandfather's funeral; soon, with the state of apprehension becoming more

34 Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country*, 224.

35 According to Mansfield, what she conveyed in her story "The Garden Party" was "[t]he diversity of life and how we try to fit in everything, Death included. . . . But life isn't like that. We haven't the ordering of it." Qtd. in Dominic Head, *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 132.

intense, the smell of death and flowers becomes overwhelming. It is to escape this smell, or rather the memory of this smell as evoked by her conflicting emotions, that she flees the room, managing to recompose herself because "it would be so *terribly rude* simply to run away out of the house, and go home, now."[36] Ultimately, Joyce takes part in an anti-pass march and is promptly arrested, together with other participants, on crossing the threshold of the Lagersdorp Location.

The detailed and subtle exploration of her protagonist's emotional states is not the only feature that makes "The Smell of Death and Flowers" characteristic of Gordimer's early writing. More so than her later work, the story concludes with what may be called an epiphanic moment of political awareness. As Joyce is being arrested for her participation in an illegal march, she looks at the residents of the location:

> When she looked back, they met her gaze. And she felt, suddenly, not *nothing* but what they were feeling, at the sight of her, a white girl, taken—incomprehensibly, as they themselves were used to being taken—under the force of white men's wills, which dispensed and withdrew life, which imprisoned and set free, fed or starved, like God himself.[37]

Despite the very limited impact of the march (most spectators do not even seem to understand what is happening), there is a degree of optimism in this passage. The decision to translate her goodwill into action leads Joyce to a moment of genuine encounter with the social and cultural Other, which is signalled through the establishment of eye contact. Joyce's ethical insight involves a moment of acute understanding of what it is to be seen by others; in other words, it is an experience of becoming the object of somebody else's perception. Allowing one's inescapably egoistic vision to be de-centred opens up an ethical moment, which—in Joyce's case—leads to a better understanding of the people she sees only for the brief time of entering the location. The anti-pass march is in contrast to the party described earlier in the story; unlike the party, which gives its participants a semblance of commonality through superficial communication, the defiance campaign offers Joyce a deeper understanding of her country through political commitment. Whether this sudden illumination

36 Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country*, 235.

37 Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country*, 240–241.

will become the basis for future action is open to question; nevertheless, the imperative to act is unmistakeable in the story. The distinctive tone of moral positivism that Clingman identifies in *A World of Strangers*—the contention that rationality and human sensitivity will inevitably lead to political action and social transformation[38]—also resonates in Gordimer's story.

On 26 June 1955, one year after the publication of "The Smell of Death and Flowers," approximately 3,000 delegates of the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Coloured People's Organization (SACPO), the South African Congress of Democrats (SACORD), and the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), forming the Congress of the People, adopted the Freedom Charter in an act of protest against the racial divisions instituted by apartheid legislation. The Charter declared South Africa to be a non-racial society, where no race or social group was to enjoy special privileges. One year later, 156 leaders present during the Congress (including Albert Luthuli, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, and Walter Sisulu) were arrested by the police. The protracted Treason Trial (1957–1961) that followed would mark a definite end of the optimistic belief in multiculturalism. Looking back upon those times seventeen years after first publishing "The Smell of Death and Flowers," Gordimer commented on the protests organized in the 1950s and the 1960s. In her 1971 lecture to the students of the University of Natal, "Speak Out: The Necessity for Protest," she argued that those protests had ethical rather than political motivations: "They were based on profound respect for law and order: respect for the basic human laws, the unwritten charter that exists inside you and me."[39] While Gordimer's belief in transcendent and immanent moral order remained unchanged from those times, what she questioned was the idealism that was built on those foundations. As she commented in the lecture, "the radical liberals offered everything, and were powerless to give anything."[40]

The 1960s: "The Things That Politics Do to People"

The years that followed the publication of "The Smell of Death and Flowers" in 1954 marked a change in Gordimer's approach towards her work and her role as a writer. The early 1960s were a time when she began to be increasingly

38 Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 61.

39 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 91.

40 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 100.

involved with the impact of politics on the lives of South Africans. Gordimer herself pointed to this development, when in a letter to her *New Yorker* editor Roger Angell (discussed in detail in Chapter One), she referred to "my increasing involvement with—not politics, but the things that politics do to people."[41] One recurring pattern in the stories published from the mid-1960s is that they feature both the protagonists who actively engage in various forms of political activism and those who assist them—often silently—in this endeavour, sharing the consequences of their partners' actions. This does not mean that Gordimer only concentrates on the personal costs of such a life; rather, her interest lies in how social and political ideals affect the motivations of her characters and the relationships that shape their lives.

Gordimer's political stories published from the 1960s display two important characteristics. First of all, many of them feature non-white protagonists; indeed, some of the most powerful works in which she explores the rewards and costs of a politically committed life concentrate on black and coloured South Africans. The second characteristic is that they are firmly set in South Africa and make references to the political developments in the country. One example of such a story is "**Something for the Time Being**" (*The New Yorker*, 9 January 1960; *Not for Publication*, 1965), which has at its centre two married couples, William and Madge Chadders, and, more importantly in the context of the present discussion, Daniel and Ella Mgoma. The life of the Mgomas is chiefly shaped by Daniel's political involvement, of which we learn at the beginning of the story: he is an active member of the African National Congress (ANC), who, in all probability, took part in the Defiance Campaign in 1952[42] and in the protests that followed. After participating in another campaign, Daniel was imprisoned for three months (consistent with the principles of passive resistance, he had denied bail and thus chosen prison) and is currently awaiting trial. He is given a menial job as a cleaner in a workshop belonging to William Chadders, a successful entrepreneur who, mostly due to the influence of his wife Madge, is willing to help black workers.

41 Gordimer to Angell, 1 May 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

42 The Defiance Campaign, which began on 6 December 1952, included mass rallies and stay-at-homes. Leading to the arrest of around 8,500 people, it also considerably increased the popularity of the ANC, whose membership soared from 7,000 to 100,000. See: Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, *South Africa. The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (London: Routledge, 2011), xxiii.

In contrast to her pragmatic husband, Madge Chadders is presented as an idealist, whose opposition to apartheid is rooted in her strong emotional reaction to its injustices: "her disgust at the colour bar."[43] Madge's liberal stance finds its realization in philanthropic work and anti-apartheid campaigns: at one point she took part in a march against pass laws "with five hundred black women"[44] (possibly a reference to a campaign of resistance organized in August 1956.[45]) While Madge's political involvement seems attractive to William, it is quite clear that his primary concern is to calculate his support for anti-apartheid causes so as not to jeopardise their financial situation. This becomes evident when he orders Daniel not to wear the button of the ANC in the workshop, which ultimately leads to a conflict with Madge. When pressed by her, he makes it clear that his priority is to reap the profits from the unjust economic system in South Africa.

"Something for the Time Being" is one of the earliest stories illustrating Gordimer's growing scepticism concerning the liberal stance. Gordimer shows how difficult it is for white South Africans to opt for real change if this means endangering their economic privilege, derived from the exploitative practices of capitalism and built on the exploitation of black workers. It is clear that the Chadders's liberal humanism is circumscribed by their dependence on this system. The fragility of their stance is shown in an episode in which Madge does her best to repair a broken Chinese bowl: "To her, it was whole again. But it was one of a set, that had belonged together, and whose unity had illustrated certain philosophical concepts."[46] This symbolic scene also shows Madge's espousal of her husband's values and her involvement in the system of privileges enjoyed by white South Africans.

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43 Nadine Gordimer, *Not for Publication and Other Stories* (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), 202. Madge's stance on apartheid is not unlike that of Gordimer in those times. In her lecture delivered at Africa Seminar, Washington D.C. in 1959, Gordimer declared herself part of the group of white South Africans who opposed racial discrimination, arguing that "my opposition to apartheid is compounded not only out of a sense of justice, but also out of a personal, selfish, and extreme distaste for having the choice of my friends dictated to me, and the range of human intercourse proscribed to me." Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History*, 112.

44 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 202.

45 "On August 9, 1956, . . . twenty thousand women assembled at the Union Buildings [in Pretoria], where they presented a petition against passes to the national party government headed by J. G. Strijdom." Shireen Hassim, *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa. Contesting Authority* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 26.

46 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 203.

While the part of the story devoted to William and Madge Chadders illustrates Gordimer's criticism concerning the liberal stance, the passages focusing on the life of Daniel and Ella Mgoma point to Gordimer's preoccupation with the impact of politics on the individual lives of black South Africans. It is clear from the beginning of the story that the relationship between the Mgomas is shaped chiefly by Daniel's decision to devote his life to the struggle against apartheid. Due to his continued political involvement, Daniel has lost his job in a warehouse—a fact which he accepts calmly, paying little attention to its consequences. His wife, Ella, on the other hand, is increasingly insecure in her awareness that without her husband's financial support, they may not be able to support their family. Confronted with Daniel's inflexible stance on the necessary costs of political commitment, Ella begins to have profound doubts as to the values governing their lives. As we learn in the first part of the story, at the beginning of their relationship Ella had been drawn to Daniel's lifestyle, but, after the arrival of their baby—and with the realization of their precarious financial position—she began to view her husband's radicalism as a profound risk to the survival of their family. In this sense, her silence is an expression of helplessness resulting from the awareness that she has lost confidence in the value of unconditional political involvement. Ella's changed priorities are at their clearest towards the end of the story, when, frightened by the danger of her husband losing another job, she suggests that Daniel should hide his political allegiances to continue working and supporting his family. While her suggestion is, no doubt, an expression of her exasperation and mounting frustration, it is also an attempt to address the issue of political involvement in the context of their family situation, especially their shared responsibility as parents. Just how futile this attempt turns out to be is evident in Daniel's outburst, which effectively closes the topic.

Similarly to "Something for the Time Being," "**A Chip of Glass Ruby**" (*Contrast* (1.1), 1960; *The Atlantic*, February 1961; *Not for Publication*, 1965) explores the claims and rewards of a politically committed life. A further similarity is that both these stories devote some attention to the contribution of women's movements in anti-apartheid struggle. In "A Chip of Glass Ruby," the main protagonist, Mrs. Bamjee, wife of Yusuf Bamjee and mother of nine children, is involved in defiance campaigns aimed against pass laws. That her political involvement is a bone of contention between her and her husband is evident in the first paragraph of the story, in which Mr. Bamjee asks his wife why she

should concern herself with racist laws that touch black South Africans, not Indians. He receives the following answer: "What's the difference, Yusuf? We've all got the same troubles."[47] It is clear from this passage that Mrs. Bamjee is strongly committed to the idea of shared—black and Indian—resistance to apartheid.[48] Consistent with the principles that female activists observed in those times, she has no regard for the race of her comrades—a fact that exasperates her husband: "Twice in that week of riots, raids, and arrests, he found black women in the house when he came home; plain ordinary native women in doeks, drinking tea. This was not a thing other Indian women would have in their homes, he thought bitterly; but then his wife was not like other people."[49]

The first scene of the story, which describes the arrival of a duplicating machine for printing political pamphlets, points to a close connection between personal life and political commitment, which characterises Mrs. Bamjee's existence. When her husband notices the machine, his first reaction is to question the reason for his wife's political involvement (her decision to participate in the protests of black activists). Aware of his failure to talk his wife out of her political activities, he then asks for the machine to be removed from the table, so that it does not disrupt the domestic order. Mrs. Bamjee's light-hearted response to this request ("It's going to go nicely on the sideboard!"[50]) points to her belief in the necessary coexistence of the personal and the political—a principle that was held by many female anti-apartheid activists in the 1950s.[51] Mrs Bamjee's

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47 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 117.

48 As Shireen Hassim observes, this principle became popular in the 1950s, leading many Indian women to join the Federation of South African Women: "In the 1950s many of the Indian women leaders involved in that effort [effort to form an Indian's women association]—Fatima Meer, Zainab Asvat, Amina Pahad—joined the nonracial Federation of South African Women and threw in their lot with the African majority in the struggle for democracy for all, rather than accept crumbs off the apartheid table." Hassim, *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa*, 24–25.

49 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 120.

50 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 117.

51 "In the 1950s both the ANC Women's League and the federation drew on a deep sense of 'female consciousness,' which develops from 'the cultural experiences of helping families and communities survive.' Female consciousness impels women to political action and, while 'emphasizing roles they accept as wives and mothers [they] also demand the freedom to act as they think their obligations entail." Qtd. in Hassim, *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa*, 28. The quoted passages in this extract are taken from Temma Kaplan, *Crazy for Democracy: Women in Grassroots Movements* (New York and London: Routledge), 6.

conviction that these two aspects of her life can be reconciled is also conveyed in her refusal to see the political as a force that overwhelms the personal: on being arrested by the police in the middle of the night, she reminds her husband not to forget their relative's engagement party, otherwise he will be offended. In the dramatic circumstances in which it is uttered, the reminder comes across as a token of Mrs. Bamjee's propriety and, more importantly, as an expression of her refusal to see state oppression as disruptive of her private life. That Mr. Bamjee does not share this belief is evident in his desperation as he witnesses his wife's arrest.

Commenting on the ending of the story, Barbara Eckstein writes about Mrs. Bamjee as the character who comes closest to the "secularized transcendence"[52] that Gordimer associates with dedicated political involvement: "Even the husband comes to realize he desires his wife because she not only survives, she lives. She has the very rare ability to sustain joy."[53] There is certainly beauty of a spiritual kind[54] in Mrs. Bamjee, born out of her love for others and manifest in her ethics of care, encompassing both her private life and her public involvement. Nonetheless, despite Mrs. Bamjee's attempts to reconcile family life with her political activism, it is evident that ultimately the political has a destructive influence on the personal. Indeed, the desperation that Mr. Bamjee feels at the sudden disruption of their family life is powerful proof of the fact that there is a point beyond which the personal and the political can no longer be reconciled.

Another story that juxtaposes politically active protagonists with those whose life is not governed by the resolve and sense of purpose stemming from political involvement is "**Some Monday for Sure**" (*Transition* (4.18) 1965; *Not for Publication*, 1965). The story is narrated by a young black South African

52 Barbara Eckstein, "Pleasure and Joy: Political Activism in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories," *World Literature Today* 59, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 343, https://doi.org/10.2307/40140839.

53 Eckstein, "Pleasure and Joy," 345.

54 In her analysis of "A Chip of Glass Ruby," Evelyn Schroth argues that "the chip of glass ruby, which Mrs. Bamjee's mother had inserted in her daughter's nose in early girlhood according to Moslem custom, had been discarded by Mrs. Bamjee, but the promise of the ruby's beauty is realized in her beauty of spirit, in her femininity, which is expanded in role to fight against the injustice and inhumanity accorded black natives by the white government in control in South Africa." Evelyn Schroth, "Nadine Gordimer's 'A Chip of Glass Ruby: *A Commentary on Apartheid Society*," *Journal of Black Studies* 17, no. 1 (September 1986): 88, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2784042.

called Willie, who, together with his sister Emma and his brother-in-law Josias, lives in a township on the outskirts of Johannesburg. Their impoverished and precarious existence is disrupted when Josias decides to take part in a sabotage campaign involving the armed takeover of a truck containing dynamite. Fascinated by revolutionary action, Willie is drawn into the plan, ultimately sharing the consequences of the unsuccessful raid: as the revolutionaries flee to avoid capture, Willie and Josias become part of this group, travelling through Northern Rhodesia to Dar es Salaam. It is there that they are joined by Emma, who abandons her life in South Africa to be reunited with her husband and her brother. The semblance of family life is soon once again disrupted as Josias is called away to participate in military training at a secret location. Confident that he too will one day belong to the groups of insurgents, Willie lives in a state of constant anticipation, borne by the excitement of his revolutionary goals. In strong contrast to him, his sister Emma struggles with feelings of displacement and alienation, as she tries to make a living for herself and her brother in a country unknown to her.

"Some Monday for Sure" was written and published at a time when the state-instituted ban on the African National Congress and the Pan-Africanist Congress led to the emergence of underground organizations connected with those political parties, of which the most well-known is Umkhonto we Sizwe, the militant wing of the ANC. The early 1960s saw a transition from peaceful strikes and demonstrations to violent forms of opposition against the state, manifesting itself in acts of sabotage, which were described by Nelson Mandela as "a new phase in the political situation and … a demonstration of the people's unshakeable determination to win freedom whatever the cost may be."[55] The reference to the new, more radical forms of political involvement is made by Willie when he comments—in reference to his brother-in-law Josias—that "he took part in a few protests before everything went underground."[56] The latter part of the sentence is a clear reference to the radicalization of black South Africans—a tendency that is best illustrated by Willie, whose thoughts and actions are guided by his desire to upturn the existing social and political order by revolutionary means.

55 Mandela, *No Easy Walk to Freedom*, 101. The passage is taken from Mandela's speech at the conference of the Pan-African Freedom Movement of East and Central Africa, organized in Addis Ababa in 1962.

56 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 233.

Similarly to most stories by Gordimer, "Some Monday for Sure" was first submitted to her *New Yorker* editor, Roger Angell. Angell praised the part of the story concentrating on the plight of Willie's sister Emma, describing it as "terribly moving and entirely convincing."[57] He contrasted those passages with the first part of the story, which he saw as "uncertain and highly explanatory."[58] Angell's main criticism was that much of the story lacks emotion because of Gordimer's choice of a male narrator. It is only in the passages focusing on Emma, Angell added, that the story becomes convincing and authentic.

What Angell saw as a stifling of emotion, resulting from the choice of a male narrator, can also be viewed as the expression of a wholly different range of emotions, which, before the mid-1960s, had been rare in Gordimer's works. Willie's narration, no less powerful than that of his sister, conveys the optimism and hopefulness rooted in his confidence that revolutionary actions will inevitably—and swiftly—bring about a just social order, in which black South Africans will prosper. Meeting an impoverished African farmer, Willie is on the verge of expressing this unreservedly enthusiastic belief in the imminent revolution and the bright future that lies in store for all the oppressed people, imagining that the farmer will fall to his knees and thank him for this hopeful news. Scenes like the one just described convey not only Willie's enthusiasm but also his naivety, creating what Dominic Head calls "a tension between optimism and disillusionment."[59] This tension, Head adds, is clearly visible at the end of the story, when Willie navigates the dark streets of Dar es Salaam, cherishing dreams of a prosperous and peaceful life which are in stark contrast to the reality.

The contrast between enthusiasm and disillusionment that Head discusses in his interpretation of "Some Monday for Sure" is not the only one in the story; no less important is the tension between the optimism of Willie's narration and the fear and desperation that are expressed in those passages that present the perspective of his sister, Emma. While Emma is a background character in the story, acting as a foil to Willie (with the effect of emphasizing

57 Roger Angell to Nadine Gordimer, 13 November 1963. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

58 Roger Angell to Nadine Gordimer, 13 November 1963. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

59 Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 167.

his fervent belief in social change), she is nevertheless a fully-fledged character and a presence that should not be ignored.

Emma's story is that of a woman who gradually loses control of her life and is ultimately reduced to a state of child-like helplessness. From the beginning of the story, her life is shaped by the decisions of her husband and her brother. When Josias informs his family about his resolve to take part in the armed holdup of a truck—an act that will directly endanger his life—she reacts with panic, but her questions and doubts are soon explained away, and she is treated as little more than a silent presence. Emma's life is subjugated to her husband's and brother's political commitment, which is evident in the fact that when the two men travel to Tanzania to await military training, she joins them, thus effectively choosing exile. Her constant fear for her family and her sense of alienation are expressed in such erratic and emotional statements as the one in which she describes her everyday life in terms of a dream from which she is unable to awake: "I get up and look out the window and it's just like I'm not awake. And every day, every day. I can't ever wake up and be out of it. I always see this town."[60] The sense of unreality permeating her everyday life conveys her silent despair, which results from the awareness that her life is bound to end in solitude since both her husband and her brother are determined to devote their lives to political struggle. Her growing insecurity is clear from her reluctance to move through the city on her own—she always insists on being accompanied by her brother.

Emma's desperation is closely connected with the awareness that, unlike her husband and her brother, she has no power to change her present situation. Addressing her brother towards the end of the story, she makes it clear that while both he and Josias have a sense of purpose in their lives, she—as a woman—is left with no plan and no support from family, friends, or comrades. Emma's sense of exclusion and alienation stands in sharp contrast to Willie's hopeful stance, based on the feeling of belonging to the group of revolutionaries, which he hopes one day to join. His hopes, however unrealistic they may seem, give him a sense of purpose, as well as the conviction that he is in control of his life, both of which manifest themselves in his repeated wanderings down the streets of Dar es Salaam. In this sense, Willie's long walks convey not only the unrealistic nature of his dreams but also his anticipation of positive change, which is wholly absent in the stance of his sister.

60 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 246.

Gordimer's imaginative involvement with the people who have decided to subjugate their lives to political goals can also be seen in her novels. In *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966), published one year after "Some Monday for Sure," she continued to explore the impact of politics on South Africans by telling the story of a young woman on the threshold of radical political involvement. *The Late Bourgeois World* concentrates on the development of its narrator and protagonist—Elizabeth Van Den Sandt—from a feeling of frustration and helplessness to the growing realization that there exist new and radical ways of responding to the sense of frustration and impasse she feels throughout the novel. The change in Elizabeth's thinking is brought about by her association with Luke Fokase, an underground member of the Pan-Africanist Congress. While it would be an overstatement to claim that Luke causes the radicalization of Elizabeth's political stance, it can safely be argued that their meeting marks a clear break in her reasoning. The last pages of the novel are best described in terms of a conflict between her essentially self-centred stance and a more radical political stand. That there is no logical progression from the former to the latter is illustrated in a passage in which Elizabeth, considering Luke's proposal of putting her bank account to the service of a revolutionary organization, first asks herself why she would take this step and then goes on to answer this question: "It seems to me that the answer is simply the bank account. . . . That's good enough; as when Bobo used to answer a question about his behaviour with the single word: 'Because.'"[61] Referring to her son's childhood response, Elizabeth begins to consider different criteria altogether: more provisional ones, which are not based on self-calculation. Underlying this reasoning is the simple contention that since her bank account is what is needed in this particular situation, then it should be made available. The feeling of necessity described here is derived from the conviction that since it is the given situation that dictates one's actions and not the other way round, one should be ready to respond adequately to any set of political circumstances without premeditation and certainly without the element of self-interest that effectively blocks political involvement by subjugating the political to the personal.

By the end of *The Late Bourgeois World*, Elizabeth is drawn towards a new, radically different model of relationship, in which the personal and the political cannot be separated (in that the former is subject to the demands of the latter). More importantly for her, this kind of relationship—as she imagines

61 Nadine Gordimer, *The Late Bourgeois World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 141.

it to be—is to be based on an unconditional impulse to give, bringing about honesty that she lacked in her previous relationship. According to Stephen Clingman, Elizabeth's attraction to Luke is connected both with his honesty and with an equality that their relationship will involve: "Each will be giving what he or she has: an ancient, but also suitably historicized definition of love; and this also introduces to the two a new kind of equality."[62] A critical reading of Elizabeth's reflections on her possible union with Luke reveals a strain of calculated self-interest in her reasoning, as well as a strong tendency towards wishful thinking, but although her political awakening is to some extent compromised, it still marks an important stage in the development of her political awareness. This change is evident in the sentence with which she concludes her narrative: "There is no clock in the room since the red travelling clock that Bobo gave me went out of order, but the slow, even beats of my heart repeat to me, like a clock; afraid, alive, afraid, alive, afraid, alive . . . ."[63] The words "afraid, alive," repeated three times and followed by ellipsis at the end of the sentence, are an expression of her conviction that the type of political involvement she is considering can help her break through her alienation and passivity, giving her a sense of purpose, as well as the feeling of cultural and political embeddedness in her country.

The 1970s: Black Consciousness and the Political Commitment of White South Africans

If *The Late Bourgeois World* is read as an expression of Gordimer's hope that political involvement can make white South Africans a meaningful part of a new social order, then it should also be kept in mind that from the late 1950s, she expressed her doubts as to whether they will find their place in post-apartheid South Africa. Clearly articulated in "Where Do Whites Fit In?" (1959), this reflection can also be found in her lecture at the University of Natal "Speak Out: The Necessity for Protest" (1971), in which she commented on the rise in popularity of the Black Consciousness Movement. Pointing to its inspiration in the Négritude Movement, which came into existence in West Africa after the Second World War, she argued that the emphasis on blackness as a positive identity was a response to the disempowerment of the black population and

62 Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 104.

63 Gordimer, *The Late Bourgeois World*, 142.

the shame that it had brought—in Gordimer's words, "the only antidote to this spiritual sickness."[64] Gordimer concluded her lecture by addressing the graduates of the University of Natal with candour characteristic of her speeches and lectures, admitting that it was uncertain as to whether black South Africans would one day want to cooperate with their white compatriots. Nonetheless, she did not end on this pessimistic note; rather, she reached back to one of the thinkers influenced by the Négritude Movement, Frantz Fanon, in an attempt to prove that the stance of protest against discrimination could become the basis for cross-racial solidarity.[65]

The year Gordimer delivered her lecture at the University of Natal, she published her fifth novel, *A Guest of Honour* (1971). Showing Gordimer's adoption of socialism as a political framework, *A Guest of Honour* is also characterised as a novel offering more radical solutions to social problems than her earlier works. This point of view is justified if we keep in mind the fact that James Bray's decision to condone violent measures to depose president Mweta and support his charismatic rival Shinza is not free of doubts. Moments before his death, Bray comes to the conclusion that he would never know if his rejection of liberal humanist ideals (and his consequent radicalization) was a justified decision. Following his tragic death, his legacy is ironically misinterpreted: an international magazine wrongly describes him as a supporter of Mweta's neocolonial policies, which Bray strongly rejected. It is this irony, as Stephen Clingman writes, which illustrates the uncertain outcome of political involvement: "The white African may make his commitment, but he cannot expect either immediate success or even, necessarily, acknowledgement."[66]

Throughout the 1970s, as Gordimer became influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement, she devoted more attention to the doubts and apprehensions connected with political commitment as shown by white South Africans. In "**No Place Like**" (*The Southern Review* (7.3), 1971; *Livingstone's Companions*, 1971), she conveyed both her hopeful anticipation of a new socio-political order and a sense of insecurity about her—and her white compatriots'—place in

64 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 101.

65 Gordimer quotes a passage from his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952, first English translation 1967), in which Fanon wrote: "Every time a man has contributed to the victory of the dignity of the spirit, every time a man has said no to an attempt to subjugate his fellows, I have felt solidarity with his act." Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 103.

66 Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 130.

it. In this story, Gordimer describes a woman as she waits in a transit lounge, together with her fellow passengers, to board a plane that will take her out of an unnamed African country to an unspecified destination. This break in the journey is a time of waiting for what is to come; it is, in a sense, a moment in the present between the yesterday of departure and the tomorrow of arrival. It is a moment taken out of time: "What time was it where she had left? . . . Was it still yesterday, there?—Or tomorrow. And where she was going? She thought, I shall find out when I get there."[67] The object that promises to reinstate the continuity between the past and the future is "the plastic card,"[68] which entitles the woman to board the plane and continue the journey. It is significant that the only way in which this continuity can be regained is by leaving Africa—it is as if to stay there would mean living in a never-ending hiatus.

"No Place Like," more than the other stories in *Livingstone's Companions*, is based on symbols, all of which have a double edge: the plastic card symbolizes the woman's right to continue her journey, but it is also curiously reminiscent of a one-way travel permit out of Africa; the bottles of spirits symbolize joy and anticipation (the bottles are to be given as souvenirs to her family at her destination), but they also convey the impulse to escape the grim reality by suppressing the thought of leaving Africa (her unreasonable and chaotic thoughts at the end of the story suggest that the woman drinks some of the alcohol as she is hiding from the airport authorities). Most importantly, the story is built on the juxtaposition of freedom and confinement, and it is in this context that the central symbol of the story—that of the great, colourful butterfly—should be interpreted.

The butterfly, or rather what remains of it, is part of an exhibition of other, similar specimens that hang next to a picture of the newly elected president, an army general who succeeded in a coup several months before gaining power. The parallel between the butterfly ("relic of some colonial conservationist society"[69]) and the successful general in his splendid uniform, is evidently ironic, and it is one of the first instances of such evident neocolonial criticism in Gordimer's oeuvre insofar as it implies the new president's connections with the former colonial powers. There is also a clear suggestion that the man's term in office—his brief moment of glory—may be as short-lived as the life of the butterfly.

67 Nadine Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 185–186.

68 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 185.

69 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 186.

While the tacit critique of the president is certainly present in the story, it should be kept in mind that it is focalized by the woman, and, as such, it is also an expression of her fears and frustrations. This becomes evident in the penultimate paragraph, when the woman, having locked herself in a toilet cubicle, wonders—in a state of intoxication—whether the plane has already left the airport: "Take off. It was perfectly still and quiet in the cell. She thought of the great butterfly; of the general with his beautiful markings of braid and medals. Take off."[70] Present in this brief insight into the confused thoughts of the woman is a note of hopefulness connected with what she sees as the weakness of the newly elected president (his vanity and pride, stressing, by way of contrast, the precariousness of his hold on the country). Acting on her feelings of hope and anticipation, the woman decides to halt her journey in this country—she throws her plastic card out the window of her toilet cubicle and does not answer the repeated calls to board the plane. This bold gesture of the female protagonist is seen by Rita Barnard as an expression of what she calls (following Ernst Bloch) "expectation affects [which] are directed towards the utterly unexpected; their focus is . . . ultimately a transfiguration of the self and the world."[71] Barnard interprets the story in terms of Gordimer's anticipation of what is the come—"an ethic of keeping faith with the open character of the future."[72] Viewed in this way, the story foreshadows Gordimer's prediction about "the order struggling to be born,"[73] made in her 1982 lecture "Living in the Interregnum." While Barnard's approach to "No Place Like" is compelling, it is also highly—perhaps excessively—optimistic insofar as it suppresses the note of doubt that echoes in the story. It is significant that while the woman entertains hopes of the future, she feels trapped in the present, as represented by her spatial confinement (the toilet cubicle that she chooses for her shelter is likened to a "cell"[74]). This emotionally complex story conveys both Gordimer's hopeful anticipation of the future and the deep uncertainty whether she (and other white South Africans) will have a role in shaping it.

70 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 191.

71 Rita Barnard, "Locating Gordimer Modernism, Postcolonialism, Realism," in *Modernism, Postcolonialism, and Globalism: Anglophone Literature, 1950 to the Present*, ed. Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 104.

72 Barnard, "Locating Gordimer," 105.

73 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 278.

74 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 191.

The uncertain political commitment of white South Africans is also explored in a later story published in the 1970s, "**A Soldier's Embrace**" (*Harper's Magazine*, January 1976; *Contrast* 39 (10.3); *Harpers & Queen*, August 1976; *A Soldier's Embrace*, 1980), in which Gordimer looks at the hopes and disillusionments of two people trying to find their place in a newly independent African country. "A Soldier's Embrace" begins with a description of a nameless white woman, passing through the centre of her city in the midst of armistice celebrations. As she makes her way through the crowd, the woman is embraced by two soldiers, white and black, who are described as if they were one individual—a symbolic representation of a democratic and non-racialist future. The optimism of this joyful arrival (the woman "find[ing] [her] home at last"[75]) is problematized by what follows, chiefly by the thinly veiled reluctance of Chipande—her and her husband's influential friend—to accept the offer of their help in the creation of a new body politic.

"A Soldier's Embrace" may be viewed as a description of the emerging political divisions of a postcolonial country (Stephen Clingman describes the story in passing as concerned with "ironies, and betrayal of a white liberal commitment"[76]), or as an expression of rootlessness in the case of the female protagonist (Martin Trump refers to her as "caught symbolically in the flow of history between the two opposing male representatives of the society"[77]). The story can also be read as a critique of "Africanization"[78] insofar as it creates a political scenario characterized by regression to racialism. It is worthwhile to add that, at its most basic level, the story is about a failure of trust. The personal dimension of the story is especially significant towards its end, when the white protagonists have already made the decision to leave the country (it is clear by now that the atmosphere of social unrest will not subside anytime soon) and are packing the last of their things. Their decision is met with an outburst of what seems to be a powerful and genuine feeling of regret on the part of their one-time friend, Chipande, who pleads with them to change their plans and stay in the country. A long and—we assume—fiery discussion between

75 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 270.

76 Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 195.

77 Martin Trump, "The Short Fiction of Nadine Gordimer," *Research in African Literatures* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1986): 361, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3819220.

78 Nadine Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 16.

Chipande and his white friend is followed by a short exchange between the white man and his wife, focalized—as is the rest of the story—by the latter:

> "He cried. You know, he actually cried." Her husband stood in the doorway, alone.
> "I know—that's what I've always liked so much about them, whatever they do. They feel."[79]

It is worthwhile to add that in the original version of the typescript, the woman's response to her husband's reaction differs from the published version: "I know. That's what I've always liked so much about them. They're not ashamed to show what they feel. He loves you. He can't help it; it doesn't help."[80] The last sentence, left out of the published version, brings together the perspectives of Chipande and that of his friends, pointing to the conflict between personal loyalty and political allegiance. In the new dispensation, it seems, there is no longer any place for white people, despite their close ties to a person in power. There is a clear note of regret in this reflection, as well as an indication of a lost opportunity: the end of the friendship between Chipande and his two former comrades is also the end of a potentially fruitful cooperation.

On 16 June 1976, four months after the first publication of "A Soldier's Embrace," the South African Students Movement, supported by the Black Consciousness Movement, organized a protest against racial discrimination in education, more precisely against the decision to make Afrikaans, alongside English, a compulsory medium of instruction in schools. Between 3,000 and 10,000 students[81] took part in the demonstration, which grew in power despite the attempts of the police to disperse the crowd. The human costs of the Soweto Revolt were considerable, with 575 shot by the police and 2,389 wounded. The bravery and determination with which black students showed their opposition during the Soweto Revolt struck Gordimer as nothing short of heroic. In a "Letter from Johannesburg," published in December 1976, she expressed awe at the fearlessness of African schoolchildren and asked "how

79 Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, 22.

80 Typescript of "A Soldier's Embrace." Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

81 "The June 16 Soweto Youth Uprising," *South African History Online*, https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/june-16-soweto-youth-uprising.

those children learned, in a morning, to free themselves of the fear of death."[82] She went on to argue that with the rising anger among black South Africans, the white liberals, who once promised their compatriots constitutional means of ending apartheid, "will never be forgiven their inability to come to power and free blacks."[83] Eight months after Gordimer's lecture, on 12 September 1977, Steve Biko, the leader of the Black Consciousness Movement, was assassinated by the South African police.

The atmosphere of political radicalization and the awareness of the widening gap between the races are most powerfully expressed in Gordimer's seventh novel, *Burger's Daughter* (1979). In one of the last scenes in this novel, Rosa Burger holds a telephone conversation with her half-brother Zwelinzima Vulindlela, who emphatically severs all contact with her, rejecting her father's political ideals and her own claim to familiarity with him. After initial shock, Rosa recollects herself and makes the fateful decision to come back to her native country and take up work in a hospital for black South Africans. Having adopted an ethic of social responsibility (conveyed in her simple assertion: "Like anyone else, I do what I can"[84]), Rosa is promptly accused of plotting against the state and consequently imprisoned.

The 1980s: Examining an Emerging Political Reality

In the late 1970s and the 1980s Gordimer evolved her deeply political conception of literature, which enabled her to see writing as participating in social and political change by exploring it in the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of her characters. That Gordimer considered her vocation as a form of political activity is evident from a number of her lectures, essays, and articles, including "Living in the Interregnum." In this lecture, delivered at the New York Institute of the Humanities in 1982, she asserted that in the times of socio-political transformation in South Africa the white writer had to choose "whether to remain responsible to the dying white order ... or to declare himself positively as answerable to the order struggling to be born."[85]

82 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 121.

83 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 123.

84 Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (London: Penguin Books, 1980), 332.

85 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 278.

The stories published in the late 1970s and early 1980s convey Gordimer's sense of discovering an emerging political reality, in which new values are forged in the crucible of social conflict and upheaval. Gordimer is interested in exploring this reality where it affects the individual the most deeply—private, domestic space. One of such stories is "**A City of the Dead, A City of the Living**" (*Cosmopolitan*, August 1982; *Something Out There*, 1984), set in the household of a black couple, Samson and Nanike Moreke. Situated in a Johannesburg township, the house inhabited by the Morekes (with their children) is, in several respects, the negation of the respectable home of the white middle class[86]: it is not governed by the principle of order and compartmentalization evident in the homes of white South Africans and—again, contrary to these homes—it is a place which is not strictly divided from its neighborhood. The house of the Morekes is a place built on understanding, communication, and—most importantly—a sense of community. This kind of solidarity has revolutionary potential, which is demonstrated by the fact that Samson does not hesitate to take in Nanike's cousin, Shisonka, a revolutionary who is on the run from the police.

Nanike's suppressed attraction to Shisonka is instrumental in creating the image of a woman who is torn between her anticipation of a new political reality and her abiding allegiance to the old order, primarily domestic. With time, however, Nanike's interest in their new guest gives way to unease at his physical closeness and the growing apprehension that his presence in the house is a serious threat to the future of her family. Her decision to denounce Shisonka to the police may be understood as a consequence of a dramatic conflict between the sense of allegiance to the larger community and the need to protect her family by eliminating the stranger from her household[87]; in other words, Gordimer's story explores the female protagonist's compulsion to separate the personal from the political in circumstances where the two are inextricable.

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86 Compare Rita Barnard's observation: "The comfortable suburban house, in both historical and socially symbolic sense, was inseparably connected to its prototypical and repressed other: to the house in the township, a place that has remained unseen (perhaps even now) by many, if not most, white South Africans." Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 49.

87 In his interpretation of the story, Dominic Head observes that "Her [Nanike's] reporting of the fugitive to the security police represents a protection of the domestic environment, and an associated fearful rejection of the incipient sexual attraction Nanike feels for this man." Head, *Nadine Gordimer*, 175.

The dire consequence of Nanike's decision to denounce Shisonka is that she is ostracized by her community, as her people refuse to speak and associate with her. By a curious parallel, similarly to Nanike's sense of belonging, which is shaped in her silent presence alongside her family and neighbours, her alienation from this community remains in the domain of silence. It is unclear whether the silence surrounding Nanike is a sign of Samson's deliberate, unspoken condemnation of his wife or whether it results from her inability to address the topic that remains at the heart of her dramatic dilemma: the conflict between the principle of black solidarity and the allegiance to one's family. Nanike's apparent lack of insight into the reasoning behind her decision may, at least in part, stem from her own unwillingness to verbalize her doubts. Unexpressed in language (either in conversation or in her inner monologue), the conflict is seen by Nanike as irrational, a factor that contributes to her sense of isolation: she is not only in conflict with others but also with herself—the 'irrational' self that made the decision to betray Shisonka to the police.

"A City of the Dead, A City of the Living" and the earlier stories ("Something for the Time Being," "A Chip of Glass Ruby," and "Some Monday for Sure") illustrate Gordimer's complex treatment of the family home as both a deeply politicized space and one which connotes the insecurity and conservatism of its inhabitants; in other words, the family home—and by this I mean chiefly the houses of black and coloured South Africans—is both where political convictions are forged and where they meet the opposition of those family members who treat domesticity as a place sheltered from the political upheavals outside.

The 1980s: Exploring More Radical Politics

By the early 1980s, Gordimer had looked upon herself as a radical for nearly a decade: as she had insisted in a 1974 interview with Michael Ratcliffe: "I am a white South African radical."[88] Gordimer's political radicalization led her to explore not only the ways in which politics can victimize people but also various forms of social and political commitment. By the 1980s, Gordimer's focus on forms of opposition to apartheid was prominent enough to become the grounds for criticism of J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983). In her review of the novel, she argued that Coetzee did not devote enough attention

88 Qtd. in Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 145. The interview in question was published in *The Times* on 29 November 1974.

to the ways in which victims responded to political injustice. Gordimer herself continued to pursue her interest in more radical forms of opposition against apartheid, of which the most prominent example is her novella "**Something Out There**" (*Salmagundi* (62), 1984; *Something Out There*, 1984).

"Something Out There" is set in South Africa in the early 1980s, when the National Party, led by P. W. Botha, sought to modernise apartheid by relaxing some of its laws[89] and implementing constitutional reforms, which, under the guise of equal power sharing, were calculated to maintain white supremacy. This was also the time of state-sanctioned armed campaigns against anti-apartheid activists in and outside of South Africa.[90] The ANC responded by organising acts of sabotage aimed against strategic targets, including fuel storage tanks, military bases, and power plants. Belonging to this group of revolutionaries are the main protagonists of "Something Out There": two black activists, Vusi and Eddie, and their white comrades, Joy and Charles. Much of the novella tells the story of their attempt to covertly prepare an armed attack against a nearby power plant—a project that requires elaborate planning and meticulous efforts to disguise their preparations for this act of sabotage. Aware that the successful completion of their task depends on a convincing enactment of ordinary life in the South African countryside, the four revolutionaries assume the roles of farm owners (Charles and Joy) and their servants (Vusi and Eddie), creating a semblance of a social order that they seek to overthrow. Simultaneously to this story runs a parallel plot of a mysterious animal resembling a baboon, which is terrorizing the suburbs of Johannesburg, posing a threat to the local population and triggering the reactions of fear and apprehension. Those two plots are, as Dominic Head points out, closely related, reinforcing the idea that "the threat is, simultaneously, an internal fear produced by a racist psyche, and the actual, inevitable threat of historical revolution which this psyche brings in its wake."[91]

89 I am referring to the laws regarding separate amenities and the regulation of labour (for example, African workers were granted the right to join the trade unions). The government also pledged to reform the system of education, while at the same time keeping it segregated.

90 One of the most infamous assassinations was that of Ruth First, the wife of Joe Slovo, the leader of the South African Communist Party, and a vocal critic of apartheid. The killing took place in 1982—the year in which Gordimer set her novella.

91 Head, *Nadine Gordimer*, 178.

Gordimer is deeply interested in studying the intricacies of her characters' interaction, especially their attitudes towards radical activism. One example of such an exchange of opinions takes place in the context of a wider political discussion sparked by their reflection on the widespread use of propaganda and censorship in the media. At one point, Vusi, the most experienced revolutionary and the unspoken leader of the group, observes that the only means for the regime to maintain order is by scaring people into stupor-like obedience, a point which is reiterated throughout the novella. For both Vusi and Eddie, this mechanism is proof of the degeneracy of the system and a sign of its inevitable demise. This latter conviction is not shared by Charles, who maintains that the rhetoric of the government proves "the power of fear, not the collapse of power."[92] Gordimer signals here a significant difference of attitudes between her white and black protagonists. While Charles's guarded and sceptical stance is expressive of his insecurity as to the success of their struggle, no such doubts can be detected in Vusi's tone when he confidently asserts—referring to the government—that "they can't stop us because we can't stop. Never."[93] Vusi's conviction that he is part of a process that cannot be stopped until it reaches its conclusion, which is shared by Eddie, is lacking in Charles and Joy, whose political stance is shown to be flawed not because they are mindless and unreflective about their bourgeois upbringing but rather because they are unable to address their doubts in the otherwise candid discussions with their comrades. It is as if both Charles and Joy were afraid that any such expression of doubt would compromise their part in the struggle.

Some of the most fascinating passages in "Something Out There" explore the intricate combination of strangeness and intimacy that underlies the relationship between the black and the white revolutionaries. United in their common goal and the risk they have taken, they are capable of reaching moments of joyful understanding. Nonetheless, taking Barbara Eckstein's observation that in Gordimer's prose "true political activism does aspire to a secularized transcendence,"[94] bringing joy to the individual who has made the radical decision to allow politics to condition his or her life, it can be argued that Gordimer's focus in "Something Out There" is neither on the joys of political commitment

92 Nadine Gordimer, *Something Out There* (London: Cape, 1984), 150.

93 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 151.

94 Barbara Eckstein, "Pleasure and Joy: Political Activism in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories," *World Literature Today* 59, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 343, https://doi.org/10.2307/40140839.

nor on the tensions in the group but rather on the necessity that this historical moment has imposed on them, namely, the need to work together with the aim of achieving a common goal. As Gordimer makes painstakingly clear in one passage: "Vusi could not function without Eddie, Eddie and Vusi without Charles and Joy, Charles and Joy without Eddie and Vusi."[95]

"Something Out There" is unique insofar as it is one of few examples of her short fiction in which she described the actions and motivations of white revolutionaries and the only one in which she wrote about the radical political involvement of a white female activist. Joy is, no doubt, one of the main protagonists of the novella. Her sense of political necessity is formulated in strong opposition to the values of the middle-class, bourgeois society in which she grew up, including the role that this society assigns to women. Her rebellion, which is not without a feminist element, is reminiscent of the dissatisfaction with gender roles felt by Elizabeth Van Den Sandt (*The Late Bourgeois World*), with the important difference that Joy has taken the radical decision to become involved in the kind of politics that Elizabeth only contemplates. Joy's life, especially her unsuccessful relationship with Charles, is a powerful testimony to the personal costs of unconditional political involvement. As we learn from a conversation between Joy and Vusi, Charles and Joy ended a six-year relationship half a year before undertaking the revolutionary action, but since by that time they had already agreed to take part in the operation, they decided not to let their personal situation interfere in their political plans. As Joy describes this arrangement to Vusi, she tacitly expresses her conviction that political goals should take precedence over personal matters. Nevertheless, despite the fact that this principle is taken for granted both by the white and the black revolutionaries, Vusi voices his surprise at Joy's readiness to consider political activism as more important than personal ties. His reaction can be attributed to his stereotypical perception of women, as evident in the unexpressed assumption that since women are more emotionally involved in relationships, it is unnatural for them to make the sacrifice necessitated by the goals of radical politics.

Gordimer shows that even a total commitment to political action, whose aim—among others—is to redefine social ties between the races, has little influence on the stereotypical perception of women as carers and nurturers. As we learn from a private conversation between Vusi and Eddie, the two men

95 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 178.

are surprised at the fact that Joy does not cook their meals but rather expects each of them to prepare their own food. Vusi and Eddie also comment on the discrepancy between Joy's name and her appearance "without flesh or flirtatiousness for any man to enjoy."[96] Karen Lazar writes about Joy's lack of physical attractiveness, arguing that "Gordimer does not break out of sexist insistences that women be evaluated through the beauty of the body."[97] Lazar adds that "although Joy is portrayed as asexual, humourless and unvital, this is not used to undermine her political validity in the text."[98] Indeed, despite her apparent unattractiveness, Joy has a vital role to play in the group insofar as it is she who brings the inhabitants of the house together, creating for them a shared life which is a respite from their everyday duties. This becomes clear towards the end of the novella, when, trying to break the tense atmosphere in their house, she begins to dance spontaneously to the rhythm of Eddie's music. Joy's dance is, above all, an expression of her need to escape reality, including the revolutionary plans and the role to which she has been assigned. To all intents and purposes, this is a moment of short-lived personal liberation and perhaps also an anticipation of times when the personal will not be defined by the political. The fact that the dance reveals Joy's attractive femininity emphasizes this point: it is only in the distant future, which they may not live to see, that individual ambitions and desires will cease to be repressed by the overriding demands of a political life. Seen from this perspective, Joy's unattractiveness is also powerful proof that revolutionary actions are connected with the inevitable sacrifice of one's personal life.

While it is Joy who creates the atmosphere of rest and respite in their shared home, it is Vusi and Eddie that give the group a sense of purpose. This

96 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 144.

97 Karen Lazar, "'Something Out There'/ Something in There: Gender and Politics in Gordimer's Novella," *English in Africa* 19, no.1 (1992): 62, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40238687. Kathrin Wagner raises a similar point to Lazar, arguing that most of the politically involved women in her novels are unattractive (she analyses the example of Anna Louw in *A World of Strangers*, Callie Stow in *Occasion for Loving*, and Clare Terblanche in *Burger's Daughter*) and seldom enter into a fulfilling relationship with men. According to Wagner, this fact is rooted in Gordimer's silent assumption that political commitment has the effect of "bringing to the fore the 'male' elements of independence and aggression, robs the women in question of a substantial degree of their sexual attractiveness." Kathrin Wagner, *Rereading Nadine Gordimer: Text and Subtext in the Novels* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 101.

98 Lazar, *'Something Out There'/Something in There*, 62.

becomes clearer towards the end of the novella, when Vusi and Eddie leave the house for a makeshift hideout (the final stage before the planned attack on the power station), leaving Joy and Charles with a sense of emptiness, as if their life together, no longer bound by their shared responsibility for their ultimate goal, has lost its sense. What is left for them is only a feeling of attachment to the empty house overlooking the power station—a reminder of their shared goal—and the sense that the four of them had a chance to share an intimacy that they had not experienced before.

The last pages of "Something Out There" focus on how the attack and its consequences are related by the newspapers and written down in police reports. In an impersonal, detached stance of a newspaper article, we learn about the attack on the powerplant, the blackout experienced by the inhabitants of the Johannesburg area, and, finally, the police hunt for the perpetrators, leading to the death of one of the insurgents (most probably Eddie) and the successful escape of the remaining three. Ironically, even the police investigators, who have managed to obtain the personal details of the attackers, are oblivious to their true identity in the sense that they are ignorant as to what kind of people they were and what motivated them to organize the attack: "Nobody really knows which names mark the identity each has accepted within himself."[99] In this sense, the police investigation is proof of the inability of the officers (and the apartheid state in general) to understand and know its enemy—a crucial step to a successful confrontation.

If there is irony in the fact that the success of the revolutionaries' actions lies in their ability to impersonate unremarkable citizens, it is also true that this irony comes at a cost, since Charles's, Joy's, Eddie's, and Vusi's enactment of a day-to-day reality becomes its permanent replacement—an ersatz of a family life that they will never enjoy; in other words, their enactment points to an absence. A similar logic can be observed in "**Safe Houses**," also included in *Something Out There* (1984). The story concentrates on a revolutionary who, trying to evade capture by pretending to be an architect working temporarily in Johannesburg, becomes involved in a short-lived relationship with a woman leading a comfortable existence in a secluded suburb. As their affair unfolds in a curious combination of intimacy and reserve, the man's identity as 'Harry' becomes entirely convincing for the woman, who clearly treats their relationship as a welcome interlude in her uneventful life. As Karen Lazar notes, the

99 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 202.

fact that the woman uncritically accepts the man's identity proves that—if he had so decided—he could have become a man who "opted for a life of safety and 'safe houses.'"[100] Significantly, this identity is also wholly convincing to the man himself. Contemplating himself as Harry, a successful professional and a divorcee with "a mistress not young but beautiful,"[101] the man finds himself drawn to the alternative life he has invented on the spot for the purposes of the encounter.

Similarly to Joy and the other revolutionaries in "Something Out There," the protagonist of "Safe Houses" depends for his safety on how convincingly he inhabits his fictive persona, but unlike them, the fictional story about himself is improvised and thus lacks the kind of significant detail that could make it more convincing. The 'thinness' of his contrived life narrative, as well as its purposeful convergence with his real life,[102] can be interpreted as a sign of his confidence—since the woman leads her life in isolation from other South Africans, both black and white, she will never recognize who he is—but it can also be seen as an expression of his desire to communicate his true identity and reach a deeper understanding with the person with whom he shares a passing moment of intimacy. That the man is drawn towards a safe and stable life is evident in the fact that he revisits the woman several times, ignoring the possibility that this may put both himself and her in danger. Even when his cover is blown, he once again seeks shelter in the woman's house: "He was sure, for no logical reason, that he was safe, this night, that no one would know, ever, that he was here."[103] Indeed, the only reason why he should feel safe in the woman's house is the intimacy and reassurance he is given in this short-lived relationship. While Karen Lazar's observation that in "Safe Houses" "the penetration of the subversive into the 'safe' is as intimate as it can get,"[104] the reverse is also true: in this story, Gordimer conveys the drama of a man whose life, shaped

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100 Karen Lazar, "Jump and Other Stories: Gordimer's Leap into the 1990s: Gender and Politics in Her Latest Short Fiction," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18, no. 4 (December 1992): 796, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2637104.

101 Nadine Gordimer, *Jump and Other Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 202.

102 Describing his job as a construction engineer, the man points out that his duty is also to pull down existing buildings to make way for new structures. We are then given an insight into his mind: "No—he must resist the devilry of amusing himself by planting, in his fairy tale, symbols from his real life." Gordimer, *Jump*, 191.

103 Gordimer, *Jump*, 207.

104 Lazar, "Jump and Other Stories: Gordimer's Leap into the 1990," 796.

by subversive political activities, has been invaded by the desire for the safe haven of personal ties that he may never fully experience.

The Early 1990s: Social Privilege and Political Activism

Gordimer's anticipation of "the order struggling to be born"[105] manifested itself not only in her exploration of radical politics and its impact on the everyday life of South Africans but also in her ironic criticism of white, post-liberal South Africans torn between their ideals of political commitment and their comfortable lifestyles. In "**Comrades**" (*The Weekly Mail*, October 1991; *Jump*, 1991), she scrutinized the attitudes of white South Africans as illustrated by the main protagonist, Hattie Telford, a former political activist. After a day at a conference on People's Education, she is approached by four young black South Africans belonging to the Youth Movement of the ANC, who also participated in this event. Impatient to leave the oppressive atmosphere of the crowded conference, she nevertheless overcomes her desire to finish the day with a relaxing evening and invites the four young people home. It is in the comfort and isolation of her house that she fully realizes the unbridgeable gap between herself on the one hand and the young radicals on the other, leading to what can be called a total failure of communication between them.

One of the key issues to discuss in connection with Gordimer's protagonist is her privileged social background. Not apparent at first, it becomes glaringly visible in the second half of the story, when Hattie invites her guests to her spacious dining room and seats them at the table to await dinner. It is, no doubt, her comfortable, middle-class existence that Gordimer wanted to emphasize in the detailed description of her house, tastefully and expensively furnished, and in the first title of the story (originally, Gordimer entitled the story "Mammon's Palace," then reducing it to "Palace," and then changing it to "Comrades"). Taking into account Hattie Telford's social and economic background, it is ironic that one of the black activists addresses her as a "comrade"; while this term[106] certainly applies to the four men, it is hardly relevant in the

105 Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 278.

106 In the increasingly violent South Africa of the 1980s, the term "comrades" denoted the groups of black South Africans, especially from the urban population, committed to violent forms of opposition to apartheid. As Martin Meredith writes, these groups were "determined to destroy 'the system' and ready to defy armed police and soldiers in the dusty and decrepit

context of Hattie, whose comfortable existence and liberal sentiments do not constitute the common ground that would ensure understanding and smooth communication between her and the more radical youth.

At the centre of "Comrades" is the inconsistency between Hattie's privileged life and the radical political convictions to which she subscribes through her affiliation with the four black South Africans and with other members of the conference. This discrepancy is brought to the fore in a scene in which Hattie invites her guests to the dining room:

> They had greeted the maid, in the language she and they shared, on their way through the kitchen, but when the maid and the lady of the house had finished preparing cold meat and bread, and the coffee was ready, she suddenly did not want them to see that the maid waited on her. She herself carried the heavy tray into the dining-room.[107]

That Gordimer considered this scene as central to the story is evident from her notes. In an entry in her notebook dated 15 November 1987, she sketched it in the following words: "She [Hattie] serves them [her guests] herself; she won't let the maid come in . . . in order not to embarrass them? In order to pretend she is not waited on??"[108] The adjective "embarrassed," referring to Hattie's reaction, was kept in the first version of the manuscript[109] but then dropped, and the paragraph was slightly rewritten so as not to disclose the motivations of the main protagonist. It is possible that Gordimer's goal was to make the scene more ambiguous by hinting at the question of whether Hattie's decision to serve the lunch herself is a token of her sensitivity—her carefulness not to offend her guests—or rather her own embarrassment at what can be perceived by them as her hypocrisy. Another change that Gordimer made to the first version of the story is the addition of the adverb "suddenly." Underlining the

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streets of the townships with stones, catapults and petrol bombs." Martin Meredith, *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 431.

107 Gordimer, *Jump*, 94.

108 Gordimer, Notebook 1986–1990. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

109 "They had greeted the maid, in the language that they shared, on their way through the kitchen, but the lady of the house did not want to embarrass them by having the maid serve them." Typescript of "Comrades." Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

spontaneous nature of Hattie's decision, this development is consistent with the grammatical changes in the story: originally the scene describing the dinner was written in the past tense, which was then changed to the present, creating a sense of immediacy.

Gordimer's notes on "Comrades" conclude with three words: "Detention; ignorance; awe." "Detention" in the last line of the story refers to one of her guests, a young man by the name of Dumile, who was detained by the police for six months for boycotts and demonstrations. "Ignorance" and "awe" are more ambiguous insofar as they can refer both to Hattie—her ignorance of the conditions that shape the lives of her guests and her shock at the radical nature of their political commitment—and to Hattie's guests, especially their reaction of silent surprise as they are confronted with the lavish living conditions of their hostess. While ignorance and awe characterise the reaction of both parties, it is Hattie's reaction that is described at length, especially her realization that her guests' radical rhetoric will soon manifest itself in violent actions. Hattie's safe and comfortable insulation from the realities of political struggle leads to a failure of communication between her and her guests, bringing her the realization, or "revelation" (as it is described in the story), that neither her lifestyle nor the values on which she built it are comprehensible to her guests (objects in Hattie's house are described—from the perspective of the four black activists—as "phenomena undifferentiated, undecipherable"[110]). As we learn from the last sentence of the story, "only the food that fed their hunger was real."[111]

Commenting on the ending of the story, Mary West refers to Hattie's realization as an instance of "ambiguous epiphany": "While this experience is undoubtedly, epiphanic, it is just as clearly equivocal and ambiguous in that she [Hattie] will continue to occupy her space of comfort, albeit a little less comfortably."[112] There is, indeed, little indication that the encounter with the black activists will change Hattie's comfortable lifestyle; instead, what the story conveys is the recognition that the social and economic conditions of her existence constitute the limits of her political involvement.

110 Gordimer, *Jump*, 96.

111 Gordimer, *Jump*, 96.

112 Mary West, "Portraits in Miniature: Speaking South African Women in *Selected Short Stories* by Nadine Gordimer," *English in Africa* 37, no. 1 (May 2010): 85, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27807131.

The Late 1980s and the 1990s: Domesticity and the Birth of Political Consciousness

The discussion of Gordimer's story "A Chip of Glass Ruby" (*Contrast* (1.1), 1960; *Not for Publication*, 1965) and the novella "Something Out There" (*Salmagundi* (62), 1984; *Something Out There*, 1984) has shown her interest in the contribution of women to the liberation struggle. This interest continued in the late 1980s and 1990s, when Gordimer began to fully appreciate the political—even revolutionary—potential in domesticity. In her novel *My Son's Story* (1990), Gordimer shows that the involvement with everyday matters implies the patience and the determination needed for revolutionary action. Towards the end of the novel, the anti-apartheid leader Sonny, estranged from his family because of his one-time affair with a white woman, experiences an epiphany of sorts, as a result of which he realizes that it is his wife, Aila, who has managed to reconcile political involvement with dedication to the family. Aila's personal genius lies in her quiet independence, which enabled her to interpret their shared credo ("Something bigger than self saves self"[113]) in a different way than her famous husband and other revolutionaries. Contrary to Sonny, Aila does not view political commitment as "bigger than" personal life; on the contrary, throughout her life she treats the personal as an inalienable part of the political. Thanks to this stance, she does not become alienated from everyday life (as Sonny certainly does), and she does not forget about the role she is supposed to play in the structure of the family, thus never losing her identity as a mother. Like Mrs. Bamjee in "A Chip of Glass Ruby," she is an integrated and fulfilled human being.

Similarly to *My Son's Story*, the birth of political awareness in the female protagonist of "**Home**" (*The New Yorker*, April 25, 1988; *Jump*, 1991) is rooted in personal experience. On its most obvious level, "Home" describes a silent crisis in the relationship between Teresa, a South African woman of colour, and her white husband, Nils, concentrating on the disruption of the comfortable and secluded life that they have created for themselves in Sweden. The intrusion of the political into the realm of the personal comes with the dramatic news that Teresa's brother, sister, and mother have been imprisoned by the police in South Africa on charges of plotting against the government. While the news about her mother's and siblings' arrest initially leads Teresa to desperation,

113 Nadine Gordimer, *My Son's Story* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 243.

her stance of helplessness is soon transformed into determination, based on the decision to channel her emotions into effective action: "She was no longer dazed; hair out of the way, her attention never deflected, determination hardened her gestures and emboldened her gentleness, sloughed it away."[114] The authority that Teresa commands precludes any doubts and questions on the part of her husband; it is as if the desire to involve herself in her family's situation—and inescapably in the politics of her native country—was so strong that it could not be subject to examination in an honest discussion. There is, of course, the issue of the lack of time (Teresa is impelled to calculated but rapid action), but no less important is the sense that the newly-found imperative to engage herself in politics at the possible cost of her personal life simply cannot be explained in the vocabulary of intimacy created between her and her husband in the safety and tranquillity of their home.

As is often the case in Gordimer's stories,[115] the question of political involvement is seldom open to candid discussion, which leaves the companions of the political activists either in the role of desperate supplicants or resigned participants. In "Home," Nils tries to lay claim to his wife first by seeking the support of their friends and then by appealing to her with an entreaty which, in its underlying desperation, sounds like a last-ditch attempt to keep her home. The authority which he tries to exert over Teresa as her husband is not only wholly ineffective but also counterproductive insofar as it closes all communication by undermining the partnership and equality on which they built their relationship; more than that, it shows that if the dynamics of power in their marriage have been tipped in favour of one of them, it is most certainly Teresa, as she now dictates the terms of their relationship. Forced to adopt a stance of silent acceptance, Nils is torn between the love for his absent wife and the growing awareness that his claims are motivated only by his egoism and take little account of their shared values (this is reflected in his dream, in which he insists on making love to Teresa, thus ignoring the safety of their child who, in consequence, drowns in the sea). The fact that he soon begins to

114 Gordimer, *Jump*, 131.

115 This is the case in the following stories: "A Chip of Glass Ruby" (*Contrast* (1.1), 1960; *The Atlantic*, February 1961; *Not for Publication*, 1965), "Something for the Time Being" (*The New Yorker*, 9 January 1960; *Not for Publication*, 1965), "Some Monday for Sure" (*Transition* (4.18) 1965; *Not for Publication*, 1965), and "A City of the Dead, A City of the Living" (*The New Yorker*, 5 April 1982; *Something Out There*, 1984).

suspect Teresa of infidelity is both a sign of his growing insecurity and proof of his failure to understand her political involvement.

Commenting on Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories* (1991), Johan U. Jacobs makes the general observation that the stories included in this collection deal with "subjects who live 'border lives' which lead to unhomeliness."[116] Jacobs adds that this sense of "unhomeliness" is acutely felt by Nils as a result of the estrangement from Teresa—a painful process that makes him realize that the safe and sheltered domestic space they have fashioned for themselves is also inhabited by the shadowy presence of Teresa's family. Nils's growing conviction that he is losing his wife to a cause which he is unable to share with her also shows that the encroachment of the political into the personal does not leave any area of life untouched, not even their home. The disruption of their life is conveyed powerfully in the first version of "Home." In this alternative ending of the story, used neither in *The New Yorker* nor in the book edition, Teresa is detained by the police, and Nils is left with the following reflection:

> It was true ~~that~~ she had left him, but perhaps there was no lover? It was for them, that house, the dark family of which he was not a member, her country to which he did not belong.[117]

By contrast, in the version of "Home" printed in *The New Yorker* and *Jump*, Teresa returns to Sweden, but it is clear that her newly-found dedication to her family and, more generally, to her native country is a serious obstacle to reclaiming the previous, sheltered existence. That this awareness is felt so strongly by Nils, who, after years of cultivating a relationship based on openness and understanding, suddenly feels estranged from his wife, shows both the personal and the non-negotiable nature of political commitment.

Similarly to "Home," "**Amnesty**" (*The New Yorker*, 27 August 1990; *Jump*, 1991) describes the growth of social and political awareness in an individual, but the story is unique insofar as it concentrates on a marginalized social group—black women. Narrated in the first person, "Amnesty" tells the story of a young woman belonging to an African tribe, whose husband becomes

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116 Johan U. Jacobs, "Finding a Safe House of Fiction: Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories*," in *Telling Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction in English*, ed. Jacqueline Bardolph (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 203.

117 Gordimer, "Home." Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

involved in the liberation movement and is, consequently, imprisoned on Robben Island. When, after five years, the man comes back to his family, he soon resumes his duties, organising meetings and travelling with his comrades to coordinate political activities in the country. Knowing little about his actions but recognizing their importance, his wife accepts his long stretches of absence and his disinvolvement in family matters as an inevitable cost of the social and political changes in which both he and she participate.

"Amnesty" illustrates the growing conflict between African tribal culture, based on traditional values of piety, respect towards elders, and devotion to one's family, and the new principles based on the struggle against the existing balance of power, as embodied by the woman's husband and his fellow revolutionaries. In the course of her narrative, the woman relates her husband's criticism of their tribe (and more generally African tribal culture), including their strict adherence to Christianity, with its emphasis on humankind's helplessness and subjection to larger forces, and their ignorance, both of which—in his understanding—lead to passivity. This criticism, expressed in the letters written by the man from prison, is duly noted by the woman, who does not comment on it, although, as an educated person (she is a school teacher), she is certainly in a position to do so. By degrees, the woman accepts her husband's stance that political involvement—the fight for liberation—takes precedence over personal life, a conviction which is expressed in such statements as the following, relating to the man's active role in political discussions:

> I stay, and listen. He forgets I'm there when he's talking and arguing about something I can see is important, more important than anything we could ever have to say to each other when we're alone. But now and then, when one of the other comrades is speaking I see him look at me for a moment the way I will look up at one of my favourite children in school to encourage the child to understand. The men don't speak to me and I don't speak.[118]

The passage is a testimony to the woman's growing political awareness, but, at the same time, it is also a powerful expression of her marginalization, as well as the marginalization of other women, similar to her, in terms of political activism. The relationship between her, her husband, and his comrades is one

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118 Gordimer, *Jump*, 255.

based on domination, which runs along gender lines.[119] This discrimination is clearly shown in the last sentence of the quoted passage, which emphasizes the lack of communication between her and the men taking part in the meeting. It seems that the only role she can take is that of a listener and a pupil.

It is a testimony to her resilience that the marginalization she experiences is not a token of disempowerment, but—by the end of the story—it becomes a sign of her emancipation. Significantly, while before her husband's arrival in the village, the woman made constant references to the first-person plural,[120] the ending of the story marks a clear switch to the first-person singular, as the woman writes about herself resting from the week's work, away from her family. In this scene, loneliness is no longer a source of helplessness, to be held at bay in the company of others, but a source of empowerment: it is during this spell of silent retreat from her family that she formulates a private reflection undermining the Boer's possession of the farm on which she works, reasoning that since nature has no boundaries, it belongs to no one. Expressed in the sombre but hopeful tone of "Amnesty," the ambiguous statement that concludes the story—"I'm waiting to come back home"[121] (as distinct from "I'm waiting [for him] to come back home")—may be interpreted as the woman's expression of hope for a home that does not exist but is yet to be created in the struggle for a more just society. While her role in this process remains unclear, her longing for a new order and her dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs are expressive of her growth as a political subject.

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119 Shireen Hassim makes the following comment on gender stereotypes in South African independence movements: "As Elaine Unterhalter has argued in her work on 'struggle autobiographies,' men's role in South African nationalism has been understood within a construction of 'heroic masculinity,' which 'stresses autonomy, adventure, comradeship and a self-conscious location in history.' The public realm of heroism and adventure is contrasted with the supportive, feminized private sphere." Hassim, *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa*, 39. Hassim adds that the 1980s were "radical years," with the female activists in the African National Congress and in Umkhonto we Sizwe "demanding internal transformations that would recognize their right to an equal role in political struggle." Hassim, *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa*, 85.

120 "When we heard he was released . . .," "After two years had passed, we—his parents and I—had saved up enough money to go to Cape Town," "We didn't know that before you come to Cape Town . . . you have to have a police permit to visit a prisoner on the Island," etc. Gordimer, *Jump*, 247–250.

121 Gordimer, *Jump*, 257. This slight ambiguity is altogether missing in *The New Yorker* version of this story: "Waiting. I'm also waiting to come back home, *myself*." Nadine Gordimer, "Amnesty," *New Yorker* (August 27, 1990): 42 (my emphasis).

Storytelling after Apartheid: The Primacy of the Political

What is depicted in "Amnesty"—the anticipation of a new socio-political order and the growing conviction that its arrival may require a reshaping of one's personal goals—is even more visible in Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me* (1994), published four years after "Amnesty." By the end of the novel, as Vera Stark devotes herself to her work for the Technical Committee on Constitutional Issues, discussing with Zeph Rapulana such issues as the redistribution of power in post-apartheid South Africa and amendments to the new constitution of the country, she comes to the realization that topics like these matter the most to her. In a scene of private epiphany, which is to become one of the turning points in her life, Vera comes to the conclusion that there can be no division between the personal and the political in the life she is about to choose. As she begins to look upon personal life as transitory, she commits herself to public service in the conviction that her work will leave a lasting legacy. Susan Pearsall rightly points out that it is politics that makes it possible for Vera to reinvent herself as "a strong, vital, and most of all effective force for positive change in postrevolutionary South Africa."[122] As Pearsall adds, Gordimer does not hide the fact that "Stark's political commitments lead to personal sacrifices and unintentionally hurt others."[123] Indeed, it should not be overlooked that those costs are considerable, especially when viewed from the perspective of Vera's husband, Bennett. Vera's decision to allow their relationship to slowly disintegrate from estrangement into separation can be seen as a token of her determination to leave a lasting contribution to the future of her country, but the fact that this decision is not discussed at all with Bennett sits uneasily with the honesty and candour that she displays in matters related to politics.

The primacy of the political over the personal is also evident in Gordimer's post-apartheid stories, including "**Mission Statement**" (*Loot*, 2003), whose main protagonist, Roberta Blayne, has decided to devote her life to her work for an international aid organization. Like Vera in *None to Accompany Me*, Roberta treats social and political commitment as a feature that defines her personal life—a fact that becomes clear at the beginning of the story, when we learn that

122 Susan Pearsall, "'Where the Banalities are Enacted': The Everyday in Gordimer's Novels," *Research in African Literatures* 31, no. 1 (2000): 113, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3820647.

123 Pearsall, "'Where the Banalities are Enacted,'" 112.

one reason why her first marriage came to an end was that "[her husband] did not share her need to have some part in changing the world."[124]

Roberta's liberal humanist principles are based on the contention that viable social change is brought about not by revolution but through the gradual process of painstaking development. This stance becomes clear when Roberta, accompanied by her director, visits a hospital for HIV-infected children, suffering from acute malnutrition. As a result of witnessing the suffering and death of these young patients, her optimistic belief in gradual progress suffers a severe blow, from which she tries to recover by reiterating the principle that acting from within the system (as opposed to changing it) is the best response to social evil ("Whatever there is, the ethic is do something about it"[125]). Roberta's doubts in the face of overwhelming social problems are assuaged by her friend and lover, the African politician Gladwell Chadrack Chabruma, whose silent reassurance strengthens her in the conviction that her work for the agency is valuable and effective. Indeed, one of the reasons why Roberta becomes involved in the affair with Gladwell is that she considers his interest in her, as well as the understanding that they share, as a token of validation. When she decides to end the relationship, rejecting Gladwell's proposal to become his second wife, there is a sense of relief (she has escaped a difficult situation without endangering the goals of the aid agency) but also of loss and perhaps regret, as conveyed in the last sentence of the story: "She was again a member of an aid agency's changing personnel, walking away barefoot."[126]

Storytelling after Apartheid: Scrutinising the Attitudes of White South Africans

In her lecture "When Art Meets Politics" (1999), Gordimer argued that the social and political value of literature lies in "the ability of the creative imagination to mine for the unexpressed in human motivation."[127] Gordimer's fascination with the unexpressed, yet strong driving forces behind human actions is closely connected with her notion of the experiential, dynamic, and elusive

124 Nadine Gordimer, *Loot and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 9.

125 Gordimer, *Loot*, 33.

126 Gordimer, *Loot*, 66.

127 Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times: Writing and Living, 1954–2008* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 550.

truth about human beings, as well as with her conviction that it is only by pursuing this truth that literature can fully express its political engagement, retaining its artistic value.

In her pursuit of truth, Gordimer distanced herself from political sympathies and allegiances—most importantly, her vocal support of the ANC—and exposed the various failures of the new political establishment. As Karina Magdalena Szczurek points out in her acute comment on *None to Accompany Me*, "in chronicling the transition and post-apartheid era honestly and identifying the sore spots in the emerging ethics, she went where truth lies."[128] What Szczurek has written about *None to Accompany Me* can also be applied to "**Karma**," included in *Loot and Other Stories* (2003). The first story in this series concentrates on Norma, a white anti-apartheid activist who allows herself to be corrupted by a lucrative job in a construction company. In a dry and emotionless third-person narrative, Gordimer describes the pathologies of post-apartheid South African society, in which the most active and vocal opposers of the nationalist government, referred to as the Underground, are careful to distribute power among themselves. People once ready to sacrifice their private happiness in the struggle against social injustice now live their lives in denial of the causes for which they fought, basing their abuses of power on the false premise that society owes them a good life in return for their contribution to toppling the apartheid regime. This attitude of entitlement is both the reason for the corruption of Norma's political ideals and the ultimate proof of this fact.

Commenting on the first story in "Karma," Szczurek points to a resemblance between Norma and Sibongile Maqoma from *None to Accompany Me*, arguing that Norma, accused of bribery and disgraced by the media, can be viewed as "the Sibongile of the future"[129]—a parallel made credible by the fact that at the end of *None to Accompany Me*, Sibongile is keen to derive benefits from her privileged position by securing a scholarship for her daughter. There is little doubt that Gordimer's concern with the corrupting influence of wealth and power is present both in her late literary works and in her non-fiction. To give just one example of the latter: in an interview by Michael March, published in 2004, March quoted a passage from Czesław Miłosz's poem "To Raja Rao":

128 Karina Magdalena Szczurek, *Truer than Fiction Truer than Fiction: Nadine Gordimer Writing Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Berlin: Südwestdeutscher Verlag für Hochschulschriften, 2008), 135.

129 Szczurek, *Truer than Fiction*, 168.

"Ill at ease in the tyranny, ill at ease in the republic, in the one I longed for freedom, in the other for the end of corruption," to which Gordimer gave the following response: "We are longing, with great Milosz, for the end of corruption. It turns out to be one of the conditions of freedom, available to more people now that the tyranny is over, as it was during the tyranny but reserved to a privileged few, then."[130] The direct connection that Gordimer drew between freedom and the equal distribution of goods, the latter being a prerequisite for the former, explains her vocal criticism of corruption among the political elites.

Conclusion: Politics and Self-fulfilment

As I claim in this book, Gordimer's works are defined by her belief that the aesthetic and political value of literature lies in its ability to convey the truth about the experience of people inhabiting a given historical period. To capture the essence of this experiential truth, Gordimer contrasted it with what can be termed factual truth, arguing that while facts can be easily obtained through television and newspaper reports (that they can be manipulated is another matter), the experience of living at a particular point in time can only be conveyed in literature, which Gordimer called "an enactment of life."[131] Searching for this experiential, dynamic, and ambiguous truth was, for her, a form of political involvement.

Gordimer's pursuit of the experiential truth about people living during and after apartheid yields important insights into the challenges and rewards of social and political commitment. In her view, politics, similarly to art, can give the individual a sense of higher purpose in life, and, in this sense, it constitutes one of the paths to self-fulfilment. While this conviction is seldom overtly expressed in her stories, it finds its realization in the actions of her characters, who—almost invariably—choose political goals over personal life. This decision brings a feeling of hope and enthusiasm, which Barbara Eckstein has identified as joy.[132] While Eckstein is right to argue that some of Gordimer's stories give us the vicarious pleasure of experiencing the joy that derives from the decision to transcend one's egoistic perspective and commit oneself

130 Michael March, "Writing and Rootlessness," *The Guardian*, March 15, 2004, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/mar/15/fiction.nobelprize.

131 Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, 18.

132 Eckstein, "Pleasure and Joy," 344.

to a greater cause, it is also true that this feeling of joy and purposefulness comes at a considerable cost. Reading Gordimer's stories, it is unsettling to see the authority with which political activists upset the lives of their relatives, acting on the unshakeable belief—never questioned or discussed by the protagonists—that the political always has primacy over the personal. While Gordimer shows the costs of political involvement, for example by juxtaposing the enthusiasm and dedication of activists with the fears and frustrations of those who reject politics as a determining force in their lives, the voice of the latter is seldom powerful enough to undermine the authority that comes with political commitment.

One reason why Gordimer put so much emphasis on politics in her works can be found in her belief that it is first through political awareness and then through active involvement that one can claim one's identity as a member of a larger group, for example that of the nation. Kathrin Wagner refers to this identity as a state of integration, arguing that in Gordimer's novels one way to reach such integration is "through a powerful identification with the public struggle which is given concrete expression in, and integrity by, the political activism that such emotional commitments make possible."[133] While in discussions about politics in Gordimer's works it is the question of political involvement that inevitably comes to the fore, it should also be kept in mind that she saw value in detachment, understood as the readiness to distance oneself from commonly held beliefs if they are no longer relevant to the changing political and social circumstances. This stance was formulated by her in connection with the creative process,[134] but it can also be applied to political commitment in general. Gordimer's works illustrate the fact that it is through this combination of involvement and detachment that one can find an adequate response to a particular situation. In this conception, detachment is the first step to making informed decisions about forms of social and political action.

The stories discussed in this chapter show Gordimer's ability both to closely identify with her protagonists—a task made possible by her creative imagination—and to distance herself from her political allegiances in an attempt

133 Wagner, *Rereading Nadine Gordimer*, 142. While Wagner adds that another way of claiming a sense of belonging is through "a passionate emotional and physical identification with the 'Other,'" I would argue that no cross-racial affairs give Gordimer's characters the sense of agency essential to forging one's sense of national identity.

134 See the section titled "Identification and Detachment" in Chapter One.

to convey the experiential truth about people living in her country. What she called "the tension between standing apart and being fully involved"[135] will also be visible in the stories interpreted in the next chapter, all of which concentrate on the topic of Jewishness. By analysing those works and Gordimer's comments on her Jewish identity, I will demonstrate that Gordimer's progressive conception of nationhood did not eliminate thoughts about her ethnic and cultural belonging.

135 Nadine Gordimer, *Selected Stories* (London: Cape, 1975), 11.

Chapter Four

“Only One Generation Away from That”: Jewishness and the Immigrant Experience

Gordimer and Jewishness: Distance and Proximity

Throughout her life, Nadine Gordimer consistently described herself as a South African writer, adding that she was Jewish by birth and atheist by conviction. In a 1982 interview, she commented that while it was true that she was Jewish, she had not received a religious upbringing, having never attended synagogue except for weddings and similar occasions.[1] For the most part, both Gordimer and her elder sister remained in the position of observers rather than participants. In an interview published in 1986, Gordimer recollected waiting for her father to emerge from the synagogue on Yom Kippur: “He had a new suit about every two years and off he would go to fast—and my sister and I would be sitting in our shorts in the car, waiting for him, looking at these people coming out of the synagogue!”[2] This brief and sketchy memory, recalled when she was turning 64, can be viewed as a symbolic representation of Gordimer’s attitude to her Jewish identity, described both in terms of distance and proximity—a severed connection to her legacy and simultaneously a deep sense of proximity to it. This sense of closeness is emphasized in the 1986 interview, in which, mentioning her father’s Jewish upbringing in a Lithuanian village, Gordimer notes: “I’m only one generation away from that.”[3] Nineteen years later, speaking to Shiri Lev-Ari of *Haaretz*, she said that while she considered herself “first and foremost a South African,” she was also a Jew and would never contemplate distancing herself from this identity. She went on to compare

1 See: Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 194.

2 Bazin and Seymour, eds. *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 248.

3 Bazin and Seymour, eds. *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 248.

being Jewish to being black: "It's something inside you, in your blood and in your bones."[4]

The central argument of this chapter is that throughout her career Gordimer was able to use the tension between proximity and distance with respect to her Jewish legacy as a source of inspiration in her writing. Starting with the stories published at the beginning of her career, the discussion will concentrate on those works by Gordimer which raise the topic of the protagonists' approach to their Jewish roots. Those works—both novels and stories—will be interpreted in the context of Gordimer's life, especially her relationship with her parents. To this end, the chapter will begin with biographical information about the origins of Gordimer's family and the secular upbringing that she received in her Jewish, middle-class, immigrant community. I will show that while Gordimer was never rooted in Jewish tradition, emphasizing that she was first and foremost a South African, Jewishness is an important theme both in her stories and in her novels, constituting a conscious and often nuanced reflection on a legacy that she may have marginalised but that nevertheless shaped her identity throughout her life.

Gordimer's Jewish Origins

Gordimer had Jewish ancestors on both sides of her family. Her mother, Hannah Gordimer (née Myers), or Nan, as she was called more often, came from a middle-class Anglo-Jewish family. Mark and Phoebe Myers, Nan's parents, were originally from London, and it was on Mark's insistence that the couple left England for South Africa in around 1906, when Nan was nine. By that time, Mark had established for them a moderately comfortable existence through his business dealings. Nan met her future husband, Isidore Gordimer, when he was the owner of a jewellery shop, which he had established around the year 1910.

Isidore's early life was certainly more challenging than his wife's. He was one of twelve children born to a family of Eastern European Jews living in the Lithuanian town of Žagarė, situated on the border with Latvia. Isidore's parents lived in a shtetl and worked in Riga—his father was a shipping clerk and his mother was a seamstress. Looking back on her father's past, Gordimer remarked

4 Shiri Lev-Ari, "A Conscience Still Not Quiet," *Haaretz*, November 14, 2005, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/a-conscience-still-not-quiet-1.4881700

in a 1979/1980 interview with Jannika Hurwitt that Isidore "went through the whole Jewish pogrom syndrome,"[5] no doubt referring to the oppression of Jews in the Pale of Settlement. This legacy is what Isidore Gordimer shared with many other Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, or Litvaks, as they were known.[6] It is worthwhile to add that Gordimer never commented at length on how the Tsarist oppression of Jews touched her father's family, perhaps because she did not have enough information on the topic (in the mentioned interview, conducted eighteen years after his death,[7] she observed that her father had been a silent and subdued man, adding that he continued to be a "mystery"[8] to her). Isidore's education—like that of other Jewish children—was limited to primary school, which, in turn, dictated his choice of profession: deciding between watchmaking and tailoring, he chose watchmaking and practised it throughout his life. At the age of thirteen, with little money and no knowledge of English, he was sent by his family to South Africa,[9] where he began to make his living by repairing watches for miners. Despite such humble beginnings, Isidore managed to set up a small business, which brought in enough money to sustain him and his family. Disdaining trade as a lower-class occupation, Nan refused to help her husband in the shop and insisted on keeping their two daughters away from it. As Gordimer recalled, "while we were living off it, getting our bread and butter from it, we despised it."[10]

5 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 130.

6 According to Aušra Paulaskienė, "A Litvak is first of all a migrant traumatized by dislocations. The first traumatic experience of uprooting due to pogroms was superseded by the Holocaust that has now become a paradigm of traumatic experience." Aušra Paulaskienė, "Memory of Lithuania in South Africa," *Darbai ir dienos*, 54 (2010): 132. Gordimer never commented on the extent to which the Holocaust affected her father's family in Lithuania.

7 Isidore Gordimer died in 1963, at the age of 75. Hannah Gordimer (née Myers) died in 1973, aged 76.

8 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 130.

9 Isidore was part of a large Jewish emigration from Lithuania to South Africa. As Aušra Paulaskienė writes, "Due to immigration from Lithuania South African Jewish community grew from 4 thousand in 1880 to about 45 thousand in 1910." Paulaskienė, "Memory of Lithuania in South Africa," 128–129.

10 Qtd. in Ronald Suresh Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen: A Biography of Nadine Gordimer* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2005), 42.

Having settled in the small gold-mining town of Springs, the Gordimers distanced themselves from the Jewish population,[11] especially the impoverished immigrants from Eastern Europe. Only Isidore retained elements of his Jewish upbringing (he attended synagogue and fasted on Yom Kippur), but he did not pass on those traditions to his daughters.[12] This lack of religious observance is reflected in Gordimer's stories, including "A Watcher of the Dead" (*Jewish Affairs*, (3.4), 1948; *The New Yorker*, 9 June 1951; *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952), whose sixteen-year-old narrator writes that both for her and her sibling the fact of their "being Jewish had simply meant that we had a free half hour while the other children at our convent school went to catechism."[13] The father's failure to preserve Jewish traditions in his family had its roots in his social and cultural insecurity; as Gordimer points out in the article "What News on the Rialto" (2001), his wife denigrated his origins, as a result of which he never mentioned them: "He never spoke of his Old Country and I, no doubt influenced by my mother's dismissal of his lowly foreign past, never asked him about it."[14] In the autobiographical story "My Father Leaves Home" (*The New Yorker*, 7 May 1990; *Jump*, 1991), the narrator argues that her father's reaction to his wife's denigration of his roots was a paradoxical one: he was, on the one hand, silently proud of his wife's (and of his own acquired) social status[15]; on the other hand, he turned his shame and bitterness into scorn directed at black South Africans, resorting to racism in an attempt to show his social superiority—a point that will be taken up in the discussion of Gordimer's early short stories.

11 Michael Wade notes that at the time of Gordimer's birth in 1923, South Africa was inhabited by 70,000—80,000 Jews, most from Eastern Europe (80% of whom were, like Isidore Gordimer, either immigrants from Lithuania, or their children). Michael Wade, "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject," in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, ed. Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1993), 156.

12 This tendency towards secularization was a more general one among South African Jews: as Peter Beinart observes, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe largely abandoned religious rituals as possible hindrances to upward social mobility. Peter Beinart, "The Jews of South Africa," *Transition*, no. 71 (1996): 66, https://doi.org/10.2307/2935272.

13 Nadine Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent and Other Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), 57.

14 Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times, 1954–2008* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 586.

15 This point is emphasized in Gordimer's autobiographical article "What News on the Rialto" (2001): "My father's sense of inferiority conversely had a sense of superiority: he had married 'above himself' as my mother made sure he realised." Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 587.

Critical Perspectives on Jewishness in Gordimer's Works

The first critical analysis entirely devoted to the topic of Jewishness in Gordimer's works is Michael Wade's seminal article "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject" (1994). Wade refers to the Jewish theme in Gordimer's writing as "an exploration of the absent, the unwritten, the repressed,"[16] arguing that while Gordimer focused her efforts on understanding the experience of black South Africans and on overcoming its otherness, she failed to approach "the primary otherness of the Jewish immigrant, of her father and his family, [which] was too threatening to be dealt with, except through repression and denial."[17] In Wade's interpretation of "The Defeated" (*The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952), *The Lying Days* (1953), "Harry's Presence" (*Friday's Footprint*, 1960), "A Third Presence" (*Livingstone's Companions*, 1971), and *A Sport of Nature* (1987), it is the figure of the father, with his failure to command the respect of his family, that becomes "the sign for Jewishness in her life and the object of her rejection."[18] The reason for this rejection was Gordimer's perception of Jewishness as "a trap"[19] insofar as she viewed it as a constricting identification with her racial and social group. Wade argues that Gordimer's writing is a testimony to the fact that "the failure to find a correct sign for Jewishness discomforted her."[20]

Referring to Wade's article, Linda Weinhouse comments that the tendency of Gordimer's Jewish characters to dismiss their background as irrelevant in the shaping of their identity is indicative of her personal stance: "Paradoxically, while Gordimer does not repress her Jewishness, she rejects its importance and she takes pains to do so openly and repeatedly."[21] Weinhouse argues that Gordimer's stance concerning her Jewish protagonists is that of "a spectator" and "an outsider,"[22] adding that it is this attitude that explains, to some extent, her

16 Wade, "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject," 155.

17 Wade, "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject," 160.

18 Wade, "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject," 162.

19 Wade, "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject," 171.

20 Wade, "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject," 171.

21 Linda Weinhouse, "South African Jewish Writers," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Modern Jewish Fiction*, ed. David Brauner and Axel Stähler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 309.

22 Weinhouse, "South African Jewish Writers," 310.

decisively unfavourable depiction of Jews as physically repulsive, socially inferior, and culturally different. Similarly to Weinhouse, Claudia Braude remarks upon Gordimer's desire to distance herself from her background. Comparing Gordimer to Sarah Gertrude Millin, Braude points out that "it was through her writing in English that Gordimer succeeded in obscuring her Jewishness and in securely locating herself within the dominant group to which her mother aspired."[23] Braude's insightful observation needs some further commentary. First of all, it should be noted that Gordimer's mother did not *aspire* to be part of the dominant social group in South Africa—she *was* part of it by virtue of being born in a middle-class English family of Jewish descent. If there was any aspiration in Gordimer's family, it was wholly on the side of her father, who came from a socially inferior Eastern European immigrant background. As to Braude's main claim, it can be added that Gordimer's enthusiastic embracing of English culture in her youth through her extensive reading of Edwardian and modernist literature had the effect of distancing her further from her Jewish origins in a formative period of her career. The key factor, however, which certainly influenced Gordimer in her decision—conscious or otherwise—to minimize the significance of her ethnic origins was the figure of her father, who failed to hand down Jewish traditions to his daughters, and, as has been mentioned, treated his customers, co-workers, and even members of his family with contempt and disdain.

To illuminate the approach to Gordimer's stories outlined in this chapter, I would like to come back to Michael Wade's comment that the Jewish theme in Gordimer's writing is "an exploration of the absent, the unwritten, the repressed."[24] According to Weinhouse, Gordimer's distance with respect to her Jewish legacy, visible in her stories, should be considered in the context of her relationship with her father: "Gordimer maintains the stance of an outsider, a spectator, towards her father and the legacy he carries."[25] Taking Wade's and Weinhouse's perspectives on Gordimer's Jewishness as a starting point, I would like to offer an interpretation that puts equal emphasis on distance and proximity with respect to her Jewish origins. This approach is inspired by the scene outlined at the beginning of this chapter: I am referring to Gordimer's

23 Claudia Braude, ed., *Contemporary Jewish Writing in South Africa: An Anthology* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), xxx.

24 Wade, "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject," 155.

25 Weinhouse, "South African Jewish Writers," 310.

childhood memory of sitting in a car and waiting for her father to return from the synagogue. The image of a young girl observing the dispersing crowd at a distance, from the isolation of a nearby car, conveys both distance and proximity; in other words, Gordimer's recollection can be taken to represent both a separation from the religious life of her local Jewish community and a sense of closeness through association (if only a vicarious one) with her historical and cultural legacy.

The combination of proximity and distance that Gordimer discussed in her interviews created a tension in which she found inspiration for her works. Describing the creative process, she pointed out that proximity and distance, or—to use her words—involvement and detachment, were of key significance for her as a writer. In the introduction to her 1975 volume of *Selected Stories*, also discussed in Chapter One, Gordimer made the following comment:

> Powers of observation heightened beyond the normal imply extraordinary disinvolvement; or rather the double process, excessive preoccupation and identification with the lives of others, and at the same time a monstrous detachment. . . . The tension between standing apart and being fully involved; that is what makes a writer.[26]

What Gordimer argued about observing and describing "the lives of others" was also true in the context of her own life; indeed, she was for herself the first and primary object of observation not only in matters related to her historical legacy but also in the context of what she saw as the more pressing issue of her social and political position as a white writer in South Africa. While this latter topic has been debated at some length, it is also possible to adopt this idea of the creative tension between proximity and distance in an analysis of Gordimer's Jewish stories.

Wade's statement about Jewishness as "an exploration of the absent, the unwritten, the repressed"[27] is a general thesis about Gordimer's problematic relationship with her Jewish identity; what I suggest is that it is worthwhile to consider this revealing statement not on the level of the author but that of the narrator and the protagonist. In Gordimer's stories, Jewishness does indeed denote a significant absence, but it is an absence which becomes the object of

26 Nadine Gordimer, *Selected Stories* (London: Cape, 1975), 11.

27 Wade, "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject," 155.

authorial reflection, often constituting a point of departure in the exploration of other topics that occupied her in her career: the cultural alienation of immigrants in South African society, the relation between social marginalization and racism, the impact of traumatic events on the first and the second generation, literature and creativity, and, last but not least, the question of national belonging in post-apartheid South Africa.

The Late 1940s and the 1950s: Exploring the Social Background of South African Jews

For Gordimer, the process of writing, which she described as "making sense of life,"[28] began with her exploration of her family home and of its immediate neighbourhood in her native, gold-mining town of Springs, at that time inhabited by around 20,000 people. In the stories published in the 1940s, Gordimer revisited the social background in which she was raised as the daughter of middle-class, secularized Jews. This tendency is visible in "**A Watcher of the Dead**" (*Jewish Affairs*, (3.4), 1948; *The New Yorker*, 9 June 1951; *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952), whose female narrator, a teenage girl, describes the ritual of *shemira*, in this case, watching over the body of her deceased grandmother. Being brought up in a lay household, neither the narrator nor her mother has any knowledge about Jewish burial customs, and it is the uncle who takes charge, making the necessary arrangements with the local synagogue. With an eye for detail that became the trademark of her early fiction, Gordimer describes the atmosphere of the house following her grandmother's death: "The afternoon of the day she died, the family and two embarrassed neighbors sat around the living room, where my grandmother's sword ferns, in the windows, made the light green."[29] The stillness of the house signifies not only the absence of a person that once used to inhabit it but also the absence of reaction—in this sense, the atmosphere of the house is that of grief, passivity, and indecision. It is the uncle, the only person busy at this time of grieving, that gives structure to the day, introducing the ignorant family matter-of-factly to what should be done according to tradition after the death of a Jewish person. The silent presence of the watcher first brings baffled surprise and then tension, when the man calmly forbids the grieving daughter—the narrator's mother—to touch the body,

28 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 139.

29 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 57.

arguing that it is against the rules of the Jewish religion. The mother reacts with outrage, which is not assuaged by her daughter's argument that "he can't help it. It's not *his* fault."[30]

At the centre of "A Watcher of the Dead" is the conflict between what the narrator calls "individual" and "professional" approaches towards death, made more acute because of the fact that her mother's observance of the Jewish tradition is rooted not in her religious convictions but in a vague sense of propriety and the comfort of ceding authority to the ageing uncle. In this sense, the "professional" approach to death, based on tradition and ritual, offers a degree of comfort and reassurance, but it also regulates the behaviour of people involved, imposing rules on how one is to display grief.

It is worthwhile to add that the original version of the story has two more paragraphs. In the last paragraph of the unpublished version, the female narrator relates a conversation she had with a friend of the family, which concentrates exclusively on the eponymous watcher of the dead. In this conversation, the narrator claims that being a *shomer* must be a depressing profession for an ageing person insofar as it constantly reminds him of his approaching demise. The friend responds that no such thing is the case; quite the contrary, his duty has given him the chance to rid himself of this fear, and, in this sense, he is a lucky person. While the ending of the story is ineffective in that it suddenly shifts the focus from the grieving daughter to the watcher, it is also telling insofar as it shows that Gordimer wanted to put more emphasis on the role of religious tradition in an individual approach to death and mourning.

"A Watcher of the Dead" is a good illustration of one tendency that can be found, with varying intensity, in all early stories by Gordimer: her meticulous attention to detail and her gift of building atmosphere and narrative tension through the description of objects and the actions of her protagonists. In her 1982 interview with Robert Boyers, Clark Blaise, Terence Diggory, and Jordan Elgrably, she made the following point about the writers' ability to convey their vision through detail: "It's *significant* detail that brings any imaginative work alive, whatever the medium."[31] This comment brings us to a more general point: it can be argued that Gordimer's focus on detail often has the effect of creating the mood of the story, which, in turn, casts light on the characters' states of mind and their motivations. This reliance on mood in her early works can

30 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 65.

31 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 195.

be considered a legacy of the modern tradition of the short story, originating in Chekhov,[32] which reached Gordimer both directly—as was mentioned, she read and admired Chekhov throughout her life—and indirectly, through Katherine Mansfield.

The tension between proximity and distance that Gordimer felt with respect to her Jewish legacy is creatively reshaped in "**The Defeated**" (*The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952), in which Gordimer takes the perspective of a nameless narrator—a young woman from a well-to-do Gentile family—to look back upon lower-class immigrant neighbourhoods, inhabited by Eastern European Jewish immigrants, dismissively dubbed the Peruvians.[33] "The Defeated" tells the story of a friendship between the female narrator and Miriam Saiyetovitz, the daughter of poor immigrants running a concession store for mine workers. The vicinity of Saiyetovitz's shop is described by the narrator in meticulous and evocative detail as a space beyond the bounds of her ordinary life, where "wild, wondering dirty men," newly emerged from "the darkness of the mine,"[34] congregate after a day of hard labour. Significantly, the claustrophobic confines of Saiyetovitz's tiny shop are covered in twilight, as if it was a space closely connected to the mines and the lives of its workers. The owners and the patrons of these shops are also alike; similarly to the miners, the storekeepers' wives, sitting in front of their shops and basking "like lizards in the sun,"[35] are described as creatures whose primary habitat is hidden from the view of white middle-class South Africans.

The emphasis on darkness, present in the description of the mines and the shop, conveys the narrator's excitement at being briefly and tentatively involved in what lies outside the bounds of the middle-class life known to her—the close, albeit reluctant, relations between white Jewish immigrants and the black

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32 Conrad Aiken rightly observes that Chekhov "manipulates feeling or mood." Qtd. in Charles E. May, "Chekhov and the Modern Short Story," in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994), 200. John Dewey takes this observation further by arguing that what unifies the modern short story is atmosphere, defined as "a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts." Qtd. in May, "Chekhov and the Modern Short Story," 201.

33 In "What News on the Rialto" (2001), Gordimer speculates that for the users of this derogatory epithet, "Peru was the end of the earth, beyond civilisation." Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 589.

34 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 195.

35 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 196.

working class. The fascination derives from the silent conviction that these two groups are not unlike, since, through constant contact with the mineworkers, the Saiyetovitzes have created for themselves a life that is similar to that of their black customers—a life led in the confines of their dark shop and their poor flat at the back of the shop. In this sense, the narrator's description of the Saiyetovitzes is reminiscent of the perception of Eastern European immigrants in the first decades of the 20th century. As Joseph Sherman writes, "Through close contact with black bodies, Jewish immigrants risked becoming not quite 'white.'"[36] The Saiyetovitzes are indeed "not quite 'white'" and neither is their daughter, since their life is led in close proximity to their black customers. In one scene, the narrator is quick to notice that Miriam pays no attention to the crowd of miners flocking in and out of a nearby hotel for black workers:

> Like someone sitting in a swarm of ants; and letting them swarm, letting them crawl all over and about her. Not lifting a hand to flick them off. Not crying out against them in disgust; nor explaining, saying, well, I *like* ants. Just sitting there and letting them swarm, and looking out of herself as if to say: What ants? What ants are you talking about?[37]

As a result of Saiyetovitzes' proximity to black South Africans, the boundary between the races has become blurred—an awareness that is greeted by the narrator with a combination of shock and disbelief. The narrator's reaction testifies to the pervasiveness of racist and chauvinist attitudes, which, no doubt, also affected Gordimer at a young age.

The close, if reluctant relationship between the white immigrants from Eastern Europe and the black workers is given full attention in the description of the economic transactions that take place in Saiyetovitz's shop. Mr. Saiyetovitz, otherwise a gentle and subdued man, is presented as a dominating and highly impatient seller, often bullying his slow and cautious black patrons into buying wares on his terms, exploiting his economic power as a white South African: "Mr. Saiyetovitz treated the natives honestly, but with bad grace. He forced them to feel their ignorance, their inadequacy, and their

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36 Joseph Sherman, "Serving the Natives: Whiteness as the Price of Hospitality in South African Yiddish Literature," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 509, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2637415.

37 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 200.

submission to the white man's world of money."[38] The unequal haggling that takes place in Saiyetovitz's shop curiously resembles a reluctant but well-coordinated dance of two partners joined not by will but by the circumstances of their lives. Michael Wade is right to argue that Gordimer is juxtaposing here the situation of two dispossessed groups: lower-class Jewish immigrants and black South Africans. Pointing to a common ground between these groups, Gordimer nevertheless "suggests an identity . . . certainly never to be realized consciously by the parties involved."[39] Indeed, it is a painful paradox—one to which Gordimer returns time and again in her stories—that the experience of dispossession does not lead to empathy and cooperation; on the contrary, it antagonizes the poor immigrant, eager to cut himself off from the people in similar circumstances.

The disparaging treatment of black South Africans by Jewish immigrants, as described in "The Defeated," is a reaction that Gordimer observed on the example of her father, Isidore. Indeed, the fact that such behaviour recurs in Gordimer's prose is a strong proof that her family's past continued to shape her sensibilities throughout her career, influencing her general perception of South African Jews. As Margaret Lenta rightly comments, "What seems to have been more problematic for Gordimer was that as a child she knew no Jews whose experience of injustice had made them compassionate towards blacks."[40] In her article "What News on the Rialto" (2001), Gordimer remarks upon her father's tendency to elevate himself socially by claiming his racial superiority over black South Africans—what she succinctly calls "self-esteem via racism."[41] While this racist attitude was caused largely by his wife's denigration of him as a social and cultural inferior, Isidore's behaviour was not an isolated phenomenon: as Gideon Shimoni writes, "most Jewish immigrants [from the Russian Pale of Settlement] quickly became accustomed to regarding blacks as inferiors fit solely to be servants and unskilled laborers."[42] This

38 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 203.

39 Wade, "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject," 160.

40 Margaret Lenta, "Choosing Difference: South African Jewish Writers," *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* 50, no. 1 (2001): 95.

41 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 588.

42 Gideon Shimoni, "South African Jews and the Apartheid Crisis," *The American Jewish Year Book* 88 (1988): 9.

phenomenon is also discussed in detail by Joseph Sherman in his article about Eastern European Jewish immigrants in Yiddish literature.[43]

The autobiographical dimension of "The Defeated" brings us to the central topic of the relationship between Saiyetovitz's daughter, Miriam, and the female narrator of the story. Miriam is described as a silent and subdued child, ashamed of her humble origins and flattered by the attention of a girl from a different social background. With time, however, as both girls finish school and enter university, Miriam decides to cut herself off from her family. A "powerful young Jewess"[44] at the brink of adulthood, Miriam marries a future doctor and begins a life of middle-class prosperity, into which her parents have access only by means of occasional photographs. "I could see in her face that she had forgotten a lot of things,"[45] the narrator sums up when looking at the photograph of Miriam and her children, as shown by the Saiyetovitzes. Seeing the parents' despondency at being rejected by their daughter, the narrator feels curiously responsible for her actions: "I stood there in Miriam's guilt before the Saiyetovitzes, and they were silent, in the accusation of the humble."[46] Commenting on this passage, Wade contends that the reason why the narrator feels Miriam's guilt is that "Miriam is a version of the narrator, they are doubles."[47] In Wade's interpretation, Miriam's treatment of her parents is expressive of "Gordimer's own desire to avenge her sense of displacement on her parents for their otherness."[48] Following this interpretation, the guilt felt

43 In his article "Serving the Natives: Whiteness as the Price of Hospitality in South African Yiddish Literature," Joseph Sherman describes the situation of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe (the so-called *eatniks*: the workers of eating-houses for the black population), who, like Gordimer's father on his arrival in South Africa, found themselves both marginalized by the white community and in a position of superiority with respect to black workers. As Sherman notes, "skilful exploitation of South Africa's socio-economic system could raise the white working-class Jew above the despised labourer." Sherman, "Serving the Natives," 510. While Isidore Gordimer's social elevation was, to a large degree, connected with his marriage to Hannah Myers, he too displayed the tendency of "siding unequivocally with the exploiters." Sherman, "Serving the Natives," 511.

44 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 207.

45 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 211.

46 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 212.

47 Wade, "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject," 158.

48 Wade, "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject," 158.

by the narrator may well be the expression of Gordimer's guilt connected with the desire to disassociate herself from her parents.

Wade's reading of "The Defeated" is compelling, but it is also risky insofar as it equates the narrator with the author of the story, overhastily projecting the resentment and guilt of her protagonists onto Gordimer. Rather than identifying the narrator with the author, it is more accurate to view the narrator as Gordimer's means of distancing herself from Miriam's stance of decisive rejection aimed against her parents. This interpretation is lent credibility by the fact that Miriam's general attitude to the world is described as superficial and materialistic: influenced by her university friends, she adopts "the attitude of liberal-mindedness,"[49] which is based on the uncritical espousal of values and behaviours embraced by the group. Having made this judgment, the narrator adds that "race and creed had never meant very much to Miriam and me"[50]; nonetheless, it is not the female narrator but Miriam who takes this stance to an extreme, doing so out of her desire for social advancement and the pursuit of the good life, rather than any ideological reasons.

The combination of identification and detachment with respect to her Jewish roots is visible not only in Gordimer's short stories but also in her novels. One of the two protagonists of Gordimer's first novel *The Lying Days* (1953), Joel Aaron, is Jewish. Wade points to two similarities between Joel and Miriam Saiyetovitz: they both come from a lower middle-class immigrant background, and they permanently leave the family home. The key difference is that while Miriam pays little attention to her ethnic and religious origins, Joel embraces his Jewishness, choosing to emigrate to Israel to help build this country.

It is worth adding that in describing Joel's ideologically motivated emigration, Gordimer reflected a wider trend among South African Jews. As Peter Beinart observes, while American Zionism manifests itself mostly in financial donations to Israel, "the South African brand retains a connection to the movement's original goal—sending immigrants to the homeland."[51] Beinart gives two reasons for this difference, the first being the difficult conditions of life in South Africa, compared to those in the United States, the other being the influence of Jewish schools and of youth Zionist movements in South Africa. While his article was published in 1996, Beinart's observation about the reasons

49 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 208.

50 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 208.

51 Beinart, "The Jews of South Africa," 66.

for emigrating to Israel—especially the one mentioned as first—is pertinent in the context of the 1950s in South Africa. The correspondence with her New York agent Sidney Satenstein reveals that in the spring of 1952 Gordimer felt increasingly insecure about being a Jew in South Africa. As she implied in her letter to Satenstein, the coming to power of the anti-Semitic National Party presented the South African Jewish population with the imminent threat not only of political marginalization but possibly of graver consequences: "like most thinking Jews, I believe that along with everyone else who is not Afrikaans and a Nationalist . . . our turn will come."[52] She went on to observe that before their rise to power in 1948, the Nationalists had been "rabid anti-semites" [sic], but after being elected, they changed course to win the votes of South African Jews. While this change was welcomed by some Jews, Gordimer pointed out that it was only a temporary strategy and a thin disguise for their anti-Semitism.

Gordimer's letter to Sidney Satenstein sheds some light on the political climate of the early 1950s, when Gordimer wrote *The Lying Days*. While Joel Aaron's primary goal in emigrating to Israel is to help build a new country rather than to escape possible Jewish persecution, there is the sense that South Africa with its nationalist policies has become a place where no racial and ethnic groups other than the one in power can feel at home. As Joel makes it clear in a conversation with Helen, he is wholeheartedly supported in this decision by his parents, despite their awareness that his son is going to face hardship in a newly emergent country.[53]

Joel Aaron, with his high-minded moral and political ideals, serves as an important point of reference in the life of the novel's protagonist, Helen Shaw. It is on Joel's insistence that Helen decides not to sever contact with her parents, despite the fact that she is repulsed by their conservative values, totally at odds with her stance of liberal humanism and its principle of non-racialism. While Joel Aaron is indeed an unambiguously positive figure and, as Clingman writes, "the novel's authoritative moral voice,"[54] he does not dominate the novel; indeed, his decision to emigrate to Israel is viewed by Helen with

52 Nadine Gordimer to Sidney Satenstein, 25 April 1952. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

53 "The idea of Israel dazzles out everything else. They see me going home." Nadine Gordimer, *The Lying Days* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), 358.

54 Stephen Clingman, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 42.

a curious combination of envy and scepticism. When Joel announces his plan to return to Israel to help build the newly created state, Helen responds that she is envious of his Jewishness: "Because now I'm homeless and you're not. The wandering Jew role's reversed. South Africa's a battleground; you can't belong on a battleground. So the accident of your Jewish birth gives you the excuse of belonging somewhere else."[55] Apart from the feeling of envy apparent in Helen's response, there is also the surprise—and perhaps a faint note of criticism—at the idea that ethnic belonging can have a definitive influence on one's identity.

Helen's conversation with Joel shows that Gordimer's notion of national identity was, even at this early stage of her career, constituted primarily through her belief in the value of socio-political commitment, as expressed through concrete actions. While this conception of national belonging is at no point contested in the novel, there is also a poignant note of regret in Helen's envy at Joel's strong feeling of ethnic and cultural rootedness—and not rootedness in general but specifically in his Jewish origins. In this sense, Helen may indeed be viewed as a spokesperson[56] for the author—not because Joel's departure from his family conveys Gordimer's desire to cut ties with her parents but because Helen's combination of envy and scepticism concerning Joel's decision to emigrate to Israel conveys both Gordimer's determination to act along different values and her regret that she would never be able to take the road that is open to Joel; in other words, Helen's reaction is expressive of Gordimer's stance on her Jewishness as a legacy that would never grow into an identity.

The 1960s: Jewishness and Memory

The topics of Jewishness and social marginalization, both evident in "The Defeated," recur in three stories published in the mid-1960s, in which Gordimer explored memory and trauma in the context of World War II. In "**Son-in-Law**" (*The Reporter*, 11 March 1965; *Not for Publication*, 1965), Gordimer wrote about the marginalization of a post-war immigrant who is trying to make a living in an unspecified city in Europe. There is little that readers learn about the

55 Gordimer, *The Lying Days*, 359.

56 Wade argues that Helen Shaw and the narrator of "The Defeated" may be viewed as "spokespersons for the author." Wade, "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject," 159.

eponymous son-in-law, Werner, apart from the fact that he is a German Jew who during World War II had been kept hidden by an aged couple, and then—after the war—married their daughter, Anne-Marie. The relationship between Werner and Anne-Marie does not bring them fulfilment or satisfaction, as they are neither physically attracted to each other nor able to communicate meaningfully (there is the issue of the language barrier that holds them apart).

Werner's inability to adjust to his new life is evident from the fact that he is unable to find a job and spends most of his days walking the streets. Having given up any hope of finding a place for himself in society, he pretends to be busily engaged in a non-existent office—an arrangement which he silently struck with his wife to shield him from his father-in-law's inevitable criticism:

> Sometimes the burden of proof of that office was depressingly heavy; how could what was nonexistent weigh so much? Just like his German claims; how could something that had become nonexistent be worth so much?[57]

The reference to Werner's war compensation claims (the name *Wiedergutmachung* has an ironic ring in the story) creates the juxtaposition between the man's non-existent occupation and his repressed past. As we learn, Werner had once been married and his dead wife's parents had been in possession of "a big fur and hide business,"[58] but—with his relatives killed and all the financial assets lost—"there was nowhere left back where he came from for him to go to."[59] Werner's past is thus primarily a site of absence, which he treats as insignificant but which nevertheless lies at the centre of his current rootless life as an immigrant in a strange country. His claim that the past is over and that it should not have any bearing on the present—such as the one he is trying to make with respect to the German government—is surprising when formulated by a man whose social alienation can be directly attributed to his past experience of loss and privation.

In the most obvious sense, Werner's alienation has its source in his forced exile in a foreign country, but his passivity and torpor can also be attributed

57 Nadine Gordimer, *Not for Publication and Other Stories* (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), 27.

58 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 25.

59 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 25.

to the fact that he is unable to deal with the burden of his past. While there is too little evidence to indicate unambiguously that Werner is suffering from PTSD,[60] he is, no doubt, living in the shadow of his past, especially what must have been a prolonged period of fear for his life, compounded by the grief of losing his relatives and his home. The past may indeed be gone in that Werner is no longer forced to hide himself in the house of his benefactors, but he continues to perceive his life with the sense of helplessness that he felt during the war. He is still both materially and emotionally dependent on Anne-Marie to such an extent that he does not dare to question the balance of power in their relationship. When his father-in-law—a figure of authority in their home—dies, he suppresses his desire to draw his wife into an honest discussion about her feelings in the conviction that she would never reveal her thoughts to him. This intuition is followed by a more general reflection formulated from Werner's perspective that "you had no rights except those they told you,"[61] illustrating the man's alienation both from his wife and from the authorities, whom he sees as belonging to the same group of people exercising unquestioned power

60 Neither is there enough information in the text to completely rule out this option. Certainly the experience of living in hiding and in protracted fear for his life during the war could have traumatized him. (DSM-5 [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition]. Criterion A defines traumatic stressors as "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence." Julian D. Ford and Christine A. Courtois, "Defining and Understanding Complex Trauma and Complex Traumatic Stress Disorders," in *Treating Complex Traumatic Stress Disorders in Adults: Scientific Foundations and Therapeutic Models*, ed. Julian D. Ford and Christine A. Courtois (New York: The Guilford Press, 2020), 4). To some degree, Werner's passivity, social withdrawal, and emotional numbness can be considered as symptoms of Complex Traumatic Stress Disorder. Among the three possible complex traumatic stress reactions enumerated by Ford and Courtois—fight response, flight response, and immobility response—the last one comes across as the most relevant in the context of Gordimer's story. Ford and Courtois point out that the immobility response involves "physical collapse and a paralysis-like state," adding that this response also leads to "a psychological shutdown, including feelings such as intense despair, defeat, resignation, and helplessness . . ." Ford and Courtois, "Defining and Understanding," 9. Ford and Courtois's description of the immobility response is especially resonant in the context of Werner's situation during the war, and specifically the times when he was hiding from the enemy. These periods of voluntary confinement could have triggered the reactions of "psychological shutdown," which, in turn, may have shaped his reactions of passivity and torpor following the end of the war. It is significant that though the war is over (it is not stated in the story how long has passed since its end), Werner continues to act as if he was entirely at the mercy of other people, with little control over his life.

61 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 30.

over him. Unable to confront his war-time experience, Werner finds himself also incapable of contesting the unequal balance of power in their relationship; as a result, he still inhabits the role of the victim, forever at the mercy of his benefactors.

While "Son-in-Law" explores the repressed past from the perspective of an uprooted war immigrant, "**One Whole Year and Even More**" (*The Kenyon Review* (26.1), 1964; *Not for Publication*, 1965) concentrates on the influence of Jewish history as perceived by the second generation of Holocaust survivors. The story is narrated by an Englishman of German Jewish descent, who had lived in Nazi Germany but emigrated to England with his father when he was five years old. Currently in his thirties, the man lives in London with his South African wife Sheila and their two children. At the centre of the story is the arrival of Renate, a twenty-year-old *au pair* from Germany who has come to take care of the two children in exchange for accommodation in London and a small allowance. Before deciding to hire Renate, Sheila tests the idea in front of her husband, whose mother—as she knows—died in a Nazi extermination camp. The unexpressed doubts concerning the idea of hiring a German are brushed aside by the man, who does not see Renate's nationality as an obstacle to an otherwise practical idea: "My mother was German and Jewish; I can just remember her, and I've never been able to connect her with the gas ovens that I've seen in documentary films and atrocity books, and in which it is a fact that she was destroyed."[62]

In the course of Renate's stay in London, the man notices her self-confidence and her attractiveness, but he is put off when the girl—in a moment of relaxed silence—begins to sing German songs which she learnt as a child. For the narrator, Renate's songs—including the one which gives the story its title[63]—are reminiscent of a history that he may have witnessed as a young boy before he emigrated to England with his father: "The association of these songs with the Horst Wessel crowd, the marching youths and militant mobs, seems reinforced, for me, by something ungraspable that comes from Germany itself,

62 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 94.

63 At one point in the story Renate sings a stanza from the song "Der Treue Husar," which tells the sad story of a faithful hussar who learns about the illness of his beloved, returns home to be present at her death, and then buries her. The English translation of this stanza is as follows: "There once was a faithful Hussar / Who loved his girl for a whole year / A whole year and even much longer / His love never ended."

from memory itself."[64] These vague reminiscences from his early childhood, supplemented, perhaps, by images of Nazi Germany as reported by the media, are strengthened ("reinforced") by a force that the man describes as "ungraspable," which nevertheless proves to be a decisive influence on his actions, as is apparent from the fact that after hearing these songs, he distances himself from Renate, choosing not to respond to her flirtations. What the man describes as "something ungraspable" may well be a sense of connection with his family's painful past—most importantly, the murder of his mother—passed on perhaps as an intergenerational trauma,[65] although there is not enough evidence to determine authoritatively that this is indeed the case.

Though deciding against having an affair with Renate, the man continues to be physically drawn to her, treating her behaviour as an invitation to marital infidelity. When Renate becomes pregnant and—after four months—miscarries, the couple takes care of the girl and tries to help her recover after the loss of her baby. Since she refuses to reveal the identity of the father, the man finds himself speculating about this unknown man. After reflecting on Renate's ill-fated romance, he comes up with the following comment:

> If she hadn't been German, it might have been me. It would have been me. Nothing stood between me and Renate's body but a simple prejudice, the smoke from the pyre of my mother's innocent body reeking round a body that was no doubt equally innocent.[66]

64 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 105.

65 Intergenerational trauma is defined as "a phenomenon in which the descendants of a person who has experienced a terrifying event show adverse emotional and behavioral reactions to the event that are similar to those of the person himself or herself." *Intergenerational Trauma*, APA Dictionary of Psychology, American Psychological Organization. A related notion worth mentioning in this context, is that of postmemory, defined by Marianne Hirsch as "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before–to experiences they 'remember' only be means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up." Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5. While there is no indication in "One Whole Year and Even More" that the memory of the tragic death of the narrator's mother was passed onto him by his father, this possibility also cannot be ruled out. As is the case with "Son-in-Law," Gordimer only gestures towards the traumatic nature of her protagonist's experience, leaving her readers the task of accounting for this gap in the story.

66 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 111.

Describing Renate as a "body"—an attractive and voluptuous body at that—is indicative of the man's objectification of her. It is perhaps this attitude towards the girl that is responsible for his failure of empathy. When his wife explains to him that Renate's depression should be attributed to the loss of her baby, he responds: "I protested that she could hardly be said to have 'lost' something she had never seen, hadn't wanted, and whose existence she had never even admitted."[67] This last statement, curiously reminiscent of "Son-in-Law,"[68] is ironically relevant in the context of his own attitude towards history: the fact that he initially claims not to be prejudiced against Renate due to his family's past, yet he later reasons that it was her German origin that prevented him from entering into an affair with her. What effectively stands in the way of the affair is Renate's unwittingly insensitive assumption that they both identify with their country of origin (at one point she tells him that the reason she feels at ease with him is that they are both German). The man reacts defensively, correcting her on the fact that his mother, not him, was German, his impatience manifested in his trembling hand. Paradoxically, what saves him from marital infidelity is the conviction that it would be a betrayal not of his wife but of his mother.

"One Whole Year and Even More" and "**The Bride of Christ**" (*Nova* 88–91, 1967; *Livingstone's Companions*, 1972)—two otherwise dissimilar stories—share two important features: first of all, they both concentrate on the impact of the Jewish historical and cultural legacy on their protagonists; secondly, both stories show that the impact of history on one's identity is so profound as to influence one's actions in unanticipated ways. "The Bride of Christ" is, to some extent, autobiographical insofar as it was inspired by Gordimer's relationship with her daughter Oriane,[69] specifically Oriane's decision to convert to Christianity. In "The Bride of Christ," this decision leads to a conflict between the mother, Shirley, who is of Jewish origins, and her daughter, Lyndall. Initially, Lyndall's fascination with Christianity is brushed aside by her parents as a passing religious phase in the girl's development, but when Lyndall announces that she has decided to join the church, her parents react with disbelief, which soon gives

67 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 112.

68 Compare Werner's reflection on his past: "How could what was nonexistent weigh so much?" Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 27.

69 Referring to her conversion, Oriane confessed: "I felt that I was being disloyal to her [Gordimer] by deciding to be a Christian." Qtd. in Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen*, 285.

way to irritation that their daughter has rejected their secular liberal humanist values. The only thing that prevents her parents from flatly rejecting Lyndall's request for permission to be baptized and confirmed is their awareness that a refusal to do so may be interpreted as proof of their lack of tolerance towards any religious creed—an instance of "rationalist prejudice."[70]

Caught between her liberalism and her scepticism, Shirley tries to persuade her daughter not to abandon religion altogether but rather to practise her faith without affiliating herself with any church. The mother's insistence that her daughter should follow in the footsteps of her parents by rejecting organized religion has its roots in Shirley's acute sense of social injustice in South Africa. As she argues, any church that preaches brotherhood without contesting racial prejudice is compromised and being part of such a church implicates one in its moral hypocrisy. Since this argument does not convince Lyndall, who counters it by pointing to the individuals who belong to the church yet remain critical of its implicitly racist stance, Shirley replies that they both—as Jews—should be especially sensitive to social injustice because of their ethnic belonging. Shirley goes on to assert that her identity as a Jew does not result from the observation of religious rituals and various customs but rather from the awareness that her forefathers were victims of discrimination and oppression: "I can't not choose the people who were barred from the universities—they were, just like the Africans, here—and killed by the Germans."[71] The parallel between the discrimination aimed against Jews and black South Africans is, however, not a thing of the past, as Shirley is careful to spell out:

> Clubs and so on. Even certain schools. They don't want to admit Jews. Oh, it's a bore to talk about it. When you think what Africans are debarred from. But at the same time —one wants *all* the pinpricks, one must show them one won't evade a single one. How can I explain—pride, it's a kind of pride. I couldn't turn my back on it.[72]

The short, fragmented sentences, at odds with Shirley's earlier calm and eloquent elaboration of her liberal humanist stance, are indicative of her emotional investment in the cross-racial solidarity of ethnic minorities. Perhaps even

70 Nadine Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 165.

71 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 169.

72 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 169.

more so, the halting syntax of the passage shows Shirley's hopes of reaching an understanding with her daughter and communicating to her a conviction based as much on reason and argument as on intuition and emotion. Shirley embraces her identity as a non-religious Jew, seeing it as a token of resistance against racial and social oppression. Clearly, her ethnic origins make her more sensitive to discrimination aimed against other minorities; moreover, in her mind, being a South African of Jewish descent puts upon her the moral obligation of confronting racial injustice, not escaping from it (taking "*all* the pin-pricks," to use her words). When Shirley emphasizes that Lyndall should, above all, remain authentic in her life choices, she has in mind not only religious observance but, more importantly, respecting her identity as both a Christian and a Jew. Although Shirley ultimately accepts Lyndall's decision to become a Christian, she cannot but feel a sense of bitterness and loss: it is significant that the discussion between the mother and the daughter, held in the kitchen, concludes with the symbolic gesture of Lyndall handing to her mother an empty bowl that Shirley accepts with a sense of helplessness and regret.

First submitted to *The New Yorker*, "The Bride of Christ" was rejected by Roger Angell, who argued that the story was too monotonous and not interesting enough to engage the attention of the readers, all the more so that similar conversations were the daily bread of many American parents: "All of us have heard these conversations between old liberal parents and children in search of a greater certitude, and it is a little surprising to see them presented at such length in a story."[73] Angell was right to suggest that "The Bride of Christ" may indeed be less engaging than Gordimer's other stories published in *The New Yorker* insofar as it lacks the sudden insight into the characters' motivations that readers can often find in her works. It seems that in "The Bride of Christ" Gordimer was not interested in putting to use this dynamic of revelation but rather in giving the reader insight into a process by which the mother comes to the gradual and uneasy acceptance of her daughter's religious conversion. A complex—and convincing—emotional dynamic characterises the mother's reactions: from disbelief and irritation (shared with her husband) to gradual acceptance of her daughter's choice, which nevertheless does not entirely cover bitterness and resentment. The fact that the readers' sympathy is likely to stay with Shirley, rather than the emotional, impulsive, and slightly infantile

73 Letter from Roger Angell, 26 August 1966. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

Lyndall, amplifies the autobiographical quality of the story to such an extent that "The Bride of Christ" reads like a thinly disguised reminiscence of Gordimer's relationship with her daughter. It is worth adding that Shirley is shown as isolated in her vocal scepticism towards organized religion: her daughter Lyndall views her mother's stance mostly as a form of secular prejudice, while Shirley's husband, at first bitterly opposed to Lyndall's conversion, ultimately decides to dismiss it as a passing phase in her life. As a consequence, neither Shirley's husband nor her son supports her in what the husband calls her "missionary spirit"[74]: they are both baffled at her initial intransigence.

Shirley's ideologically motivated alienation brings up the question of whether her stance of protest can be generalized in the context of South African Jews. Debates as to whether Jews should support black and coloured South Africans date back to the beginning of the 20th century, specifically to the years 1906–1914, when Gandhi developed his doctrine of *satyagraha.* As Gideon Shimoni points out, among Gandhi's closest associates were Jews, including the English-born Henry Polak and Hermann Kalenbach from Lithuania. While both these figures—and no doubt other like-minded Jews—supported the principle of cross-racial cooperation, arguing for the need to champion the cause of South African Indians, others maintained that the interest of Jewish people lay primarily in identifying themselves with the ruling white minority. Shimoni asserts that this issue, or "controversy," as he terms it, "remained substantially the same thereafter."[75]

If there was a debate about whether or not South Africans of Jewish origins should support other racial and ethnic groups in the struggle against apartheid, the voice that predominated was one that advocated for political involvement only in affairs directly affecting the Jewish population.[76] Shirli

74 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 180.

75 Shimoni, "South African Jews and the Apartheid Crisis," 8.

76 Both Peter Beinart and Gideon Shimoni point to the fact that the anti-apartheid stance of solidarity with other races gained little institutional support. Shimoni argues that political involvement among Jews "reflected the attitudes of only a very small segment of the total Jewish population." Shimoni, *South African Jews and the Apartheid Crisis*, 12. Beinart writes that "from the 1950s through the 1980s, the stance of South African Jewish Board of Deputies, the corporate body of South African Jewry, was that it would take positions only on questions directly affecting the welfare of Jews." Beinart, *The Jews of South Africa*, 70. Franklin Adler observes that "it was only after 1985 that the Board of Jewish Deputies formally condemned apartheid," which led to the formation of such organizations as Jews

Gilbert argues that while the parallels between Nazi Germany and nationalist South Africa had been made already in the early 1940s, after the victory of the National Party in 1948, they were largely confined to Jewish public leaders, including the representatives of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD). Gilbert mentions such figures as Gerald Lazarus (SAJBD chairman), Franz Auerbach, Rabbi Solomon Rappaport, Chief Rabbi Louis Rabinowitz, and a Hungarian rabbi Dr. André Ungar. Despite those voices of protest, the general line was to downplay any similarities between antisemitism and racism—a tendency that can be attributed to the enduring feeling of political insecurity of the Jewish minority and the need to establish good relations with the ruling National Party.[77] While most Jews did not vote for the National Party, they supported the United Party, which did not take a firm stance on apartheid and largely showed acceptance of white supremacy. This stance of political non-involvement had its roots in the fears that any signs of political opposition might endanger the position of the Jewish minority.[78]

Despite the conservative attitudes among some part of the Jewish population in South Africa, it should be emphasized that many Jewish intellectuals and activists were involved in contesting the regime of apartheid. As Shimoni notes, among the 156 people who were accused in the 1956 Treason Trial, twenty-three were white and more than half of this figure stood for Jewish activists. Among the seventeen people detained during the Rivonia Arrests of July 1963, five were white, all of them Jewish. The group of Jewish politicians and activists included such prominent figures as Ruth First, Joe Slovo, Ray Simons, Albie Sachs, Raymond Suttner, Ronnie Kasrils, and others (all the mentioned activists belonged to the African National Congress, with Slovo,

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for Justice (in Cape Town) and Jews for Social Justice (in Johannesburg). Franklin Adler, "South African Jews and Apartheid," *Macalester International* 9 (Fall 2000): 186, http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol9/iss1/12.

77 As Gilbert writes, "Some South Africans, both Jews and non-Jews, invoked the Holocaust in order to protest racial injustices, but for the mainstream community it came to serve primarily as a touchstone for talking about Jewish national survival, with little if any reference to the South African context." Shirli Gilbert, "Jews and the Racial State: Legacies of the Holocaust in Apartheid South Africa, 1945–60," *Jewish Social Studies* 16, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2010): 55, https://doi.org/10.2979/jewisocistud.16.3.32.

78 As Beinart notes, "Their sense of being outsiders made them fearful that any political opposition would be interpreted as disloyalty, and confident that they bore little responsibility for what the state did anyway." Beinart, "The Jews of South Africa," 72.

Simons, and Sachs serving on the ANC's National Executive Committee, and Kasrils acting as the head of intelligence of ANC's military wing Umkhonto we Sizwe). The vocal critics of anti-apartheid were not limited to the ANC—to give one example, Helen Suzman, who entered Parliament in 1952, was a member of the United Party and co-founded the Progressive Party in 1959. Suzman openly criticised the injustices of the apartheid legislation. A more cautious political stance was represented by Harry Schwarz, also a member of the Progressive Party, who opposed abrupt political change, arguing that it may lead to a non-democratic system of government, which would endanger the interests of the Jewish community. If Shimoni is right to argue that Schwarz "came closer [than Suzman] to epitomizing the normative orientation of politically aware South African Jews,"[79] then Gordimer was certainly not representative of the group: a firm supporter of the ANC, by the 1970s she described herself consistently not as a liberal but as a radical.

Considering the involvement of Jewish intellectuals and activists in the context of "The Bride of Christ," the most pertinent view that emerges is one expressed by Franz Auerbach, an intellectual and educator who escaped the Nazi regime in 1937, establishing himself in South Africa as an educator and a political leader (he was president of the South African Institute of Race Relations and member of the Jewish Board of Deputies). Vocally opposing racial segregation, especially the forced migration of black people to homelands, Auerbach drew a parallel between the treatment of non-white South Africans and the persecution of Jews during the Nazi regime: "I have always held that the experience of the Holocaust obliged me to oppose racial discrimination, especially where it is enforced by law."[80] While Auerbach's conviction derived from his first-hand experience of racial oppression, Shirley's beliefs are based on the sense of allegiance to the previous generations of persecuted Jews; nonetheless, the sense of obligation is just as clearly expressed in both instances.

The Kafka Connection: "Letter from His Father" (1983)

Three years after publishing her sixth collection, *Livingstone's Companions* (1972), Gordimer compiled a selection of stories for the London publisher Cape. In the introduction to this book, she raises a number of interesting issues, among

79 Shimoni, "South African Jews and the Apartheid Crisis," 19.

80 Shimoni, "South African Jews and the Apartheid Crisis," 23.

them the creative process, which she describes as originating in the writer's stance of simultaneous involvement and detachment. A related topic discussed by Gordimer in this introduction is the origins of her inspiration, which, as she notes, begins with her observation of other people's daily lives. "What I have written," claims Gordimer, "represents alternatives to the development of a life as it was formed before I encountered it and as it will continue, out of my sight."[81] She then adds, "Fiction is a way of exploring possibilities present but undreamt of in the living of a single life."[82]

The imaginative involvement that Gordimer saw as a crucial part of being a successful writer also applied to the people whose lives fascinated her through the medium of literature. One of the most convincing tokens of such fascination is her story "**Letter from His Father**" (*London Review of Books*, 20 October–2 November 1983; *Something Out There*, 1984), which can be described as Gordimer's creative response to Kafka's works, most importantly, the letter that Franz Kafka wrote to his father, Hermann. Kafka wrote his "Brief an den Vater" at the age of thirty-five (five years before his death), in November 1919 at a sanatorium in Schelesen,[83] where he was recovering from tuberculosis. Although the letter is addressed to Hermann, Kafka did not send it to him; instead, he made a typed copy of his missive, which he sent to Milena Jesenská. He also asked his mother to send a copy to his father, which she failed to do.[84] Later in his life, Kafka regretted having written the letter at all: in a letter to Milena he referred to it as "bad and unnecessary."[85]

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81 Gordimer, *Selected Stories*, 12.

82 Gordimer, *Selected Stories*, 12.

83 Currently Želízy, a village in the north of the Czech Republic, not far from Prague.

84 "She could not bring herself to deliver it, and this may have been exactly what the son had hoped for." Hannah and Richard Stokes, "Introduction to *Dearest Father*," in *Dearest Father*, trans. Hannah and Richard Stokes (Richmond: Oneworld Classics, 2010), 10.

85 Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, trans. Tania and James Stern (London: Vintage Books), 1999, 130. Kafka's criticism of the letter should be considered against the background of his critical attitude towards letter writing in general: he considered the letter to be a form of communication which is liable to deception and distortion. As he wrote in one of many letters to Milena Jesenská, "People have hardly ever deceived me, but letters always—and as a matter of fact not only those of other people, but my own." Kafka, *Letters to Milena*, 182. It should be added that while Kafka approached his own letters with caution, especially with the passage of time, Milena did not share this attitude. She described Kafka as a person who stayed honest and authentic both with respect to others and himself: "We all seem to live because we have at one time or another taken refuge in a lie, in blindness, enthusiasm, or

What inspired Gordimer to write "Letter from His Father" was partly Kafka's autobiographical writing and partly his biography by Ronald Hayman.[86] As she pointed out in her letter to Timothy Seldes, reading Kafka and Hayman, she found in herself a kind of sympathy for Kafka's father—a sympathy not without some irony, it seems:

> Since, a year ago, I read the Ronald Hayman biography of Kafka, and went back to the diaries and notebooks, I have come to have some sort of feeling for the sufferings of old man Kafka, and have found myself at odd times, half-awake, thinking what <u>his</u> point of view might sound like. For surely Franz must have been the most infuriating person in the world. Poor gross Hermann . . .[87]

Gordimer then went on to observe that the impulse to write a fictional response to Kafka's "Letter to His Father" was that since the year 1983 was the centenary of Kafka's birth, she hoped that "a magazine of the right kind would be amused to publish the <u>Letter</u>."[88] Gordimer's aim was to appeal both to those familiar with Kafka's letter, who would appreciate the play of inferences in her story, and to a wider group of readers who would find the letter compelling due to its exploration of the father-son relationship.

The readers of "Letter from His Father" may indeed find it intriguing also because of some striking parallels between Kafka's family situation and that of Gordimer. One of the critics to point to this analogy is Andrew Vogel Ettin,

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optimism, in a belief, in pessimism, or whatever. But he has never fled to a protective refuge, nowhere. He is absolutely incapable of lying, just as he is incapable of getting drunk. He has no refuge, no home." Jeremy Adler, *Franz Kafka* (Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 2004), 122.

86 Gordimer's list of sources shows that she made reference to two books when writing "Letter from His Father": *A Biography of Kafka* (1981) by Ronald Hayman and a collection of Kafka's writing titled *Wedding Preparations and Other Pieces* (1954), translated by Eithne Wilkin and Ernst Kaiser and published by Secker and Warburg. Before writing "Letter from His Father" Gordimer made almost twenty pages of notes in which she copied passages from the two books and wrote short, first-person commentaries on Kafka's life from the perspective of his father (many of those passages she later incorporated into the story).

87 Nadine Gordimer to Timothy Seldes, 16 June 1983. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

88 Nadine Gordimer to Timothy Seldes, 16 June 1983. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

who argues that in this story "Gordimer may partly be coming to terms with her relationship with her uneducated, unintellectual father, whose personality she had found wanting and whose Jewish practice (nominal as it was) she did not share."[89] Hermann Kafka and Isidore Gordimer were, no doubt, polar opposites in terms of character and temperament: Hermann, in many respects an overbearing and impatient man, dominated his family, while Isidore was subdued and passive, leaving his wife to shape their family life. Nevertheless, the similarities between the two men should not be overlooked, the first of those being that much like Hermann Kafka, Isidore Gordimer practised religion only on occasion, and, again like Kafka, he failed to hand down Jewish traditions to his children. Unlike Kafka, Gordimer was never openly critical of her father's stance regarding Jewish religion and tradition, but she did treat it as a token of his weak position in the family. Another similarity that Gordimer must have noticed between Hermann Kafka and Isidore Gordimer was their treatment of other people, specifically their employees: both men were inconsiderate and, at times, even cruel towards their co-workers, not hesitating to show their superiority on a daily basis. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to argue that both Kafka and Gordimer were baffled and insulted by their fathers' dedication to their closest family and their simultaneous lack of consideration for other people.

In "Letter from His Father," Gordimer's Hermann Kafka presents his belated response to his son's undelivered letter. The letter is written at a time when both the father and the son are dead, lying side by side in the same grave in the New Jewish Cemetery in Prague (Kafka is buried with his father and his mother, Julie Kafka, both of whom died in the early 1930s). The intriguing beginning of the second paragraph—"I write to you after we are both dead"[90]—clearly suggests that Hermann is addressing his son from the hereafter, which they both inhabit. As he makes clear, he does not anticipate any response from his son: "You don't stir. There won't be any response from you, I know that."[91] Similarly to Kafka's letter, which was written but never delivered, Hermann's missive never receives a reply, although it cannot be ruled out that the son can hear his father's words, but, for some reason, he fails to

89 Andrew Vogel Ettin, *Betrayals of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 133–134.

90 Nadine Gordimer, *Something Out There* (London: Cape, 1984), 40.

91 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 40.

answer them—perhaps a gesture of rejection in its own right. By creating this intriguing scenario, Gordimer reinstates the paradoxical situation of proximity and distance between the father and the son; despite the fact that after their death they remain close in the physical sense, as they were close throughout their life, they are still unable to communicate. As a result, their letters can be described as failed attempts at a meaningful dialogue; in other words, they are confessional monologues with dialogic elements, where the writers imagine their addressees' replies.

At the heart of Kafka's long and undelivered missive is the acute sense of his failure to live up to the image of the ideal son,[92] but the letter also conveys Kafka's criticism of his father, ranging from Hermann's uncouth manners at the table to the disparaging treatment of his employees. What transpires from this ambiguous and, at times, contradictory text is Kafka's aversion to his family and his overwhelming need to distance himself from them by marrying (ultimately a failed attempt) and by writing. As he makes clear in the letter, writing is for him a way of negotiating freedom for himself—an attempt that he saw as doomed to failure but necessary nevertheless.

Among the numerous issues raised by Kafka in his "Brief an den Vater," one which is especially pertinent in the context of the present discussion is Franz's and Hermann's differing attitudes to Judaism. In his letter, Kafka questions his father's religious faith, arguing that Hermann's inauthentic and purely social religiousness was a remnant of his upbringing, cultivated more by force of habit than by an authentic religious need. Being forced by his father to participate in religious rituals, Kafka at first felt guilty for his lack of dedication to religious observance—a flaw that he saw as directly inherited from his father—but he later consistently opposed what he viewed as Hermann's hypocrisy. Relating his visits to the synagogue, Kafka describes either wandering around the temple in boredom or dreading the prospect of being asked to read the Torah. At home, the only ritual that the family observed was the *Seder* service on the first evening of Passover, which, as Kafka relates in his letter, had none of the solemnity it required. Confronted with this highly unconvincing version of Judaism, Kafka decided to reject it wholesale, but, later in his life, he began to probe into his father's faith, seeing it largely as a remnant of his upbringing (Hermann Kafka was brought up in the small village of Wossek, in which his

92 The relationship between Franz and Hermann Kafka is discussed at length in Chapter Six, which concentrates on parent-child relationships.

father, Jakob Kafka, had the role of a *schochet*—a ritual slaughterer). The way Kafka presents it, his father was cut off from his Jewish roots as a result of urban immigration, and his superficial observance of Jewish rituals was simply a nostalgic way of reaffirming his identity:

> At bottom the faith that ruled your life consisted in your believing in the unconditional rightness of the opinions prevailing in a particular class of Jewish society, and hence actually, since these opinions were part and parcel of your own nature, in believing in yourself.[93]

This passage, underlined by Gordimer in her copy of "Brief an den Vater," is followed by the assertion that the religious rituals performed by Hermann were nothing but "little souvenirs of earlier times."[94] By a perverse logic, Kafka's observation about the secularization of Jews is not really an accusation of impiety but rather an ironic statement about his father's innocence and ignorance; in this sense, it is an indirect accusation of succumbing to a power that Hermann essentially failed to recognize—namely, the impact of rapid urbanization on the more traditional, rural Jewish mentality.

Kafka's Judaism developed in opposition to that of his father. While in his schooldays he rejected both Zionism and Judaism, he embraced both in his late twenties,[95] largely as a result of his fascination with a theatrical troupe called the Polish Yiddish Musical Drama Company, led by Jizchak Löwy.[96]

93 Franz Kafka, *Wedding Preparations and Other Posthumous Prose Writings*, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Secker & Warburg, 1954), 194.

94 Kafka, *Wedding Preparations and Other Posthumous Prose Writings*, 194.

95 "As a schoolboy Kafka was to become almost fanatically opposed to both Zionism and Judaism, and later still to become deeply interested in both." Ronald Hayman, *A Biography of Kafka* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), 27.

96 The first entry in Kafka's diary describing the troupe is dated 5 October 1911. The entry conveys Kafka's mixed feelings of bafflement and fascination with the actors that appealed to him because of what he saw as their outsider status and their simultaneous involvement in issues touching the Orthodox Jewish community: Kafka describes them as "people who, precisely as a result of their being set apart, are very close to the centre of the community's life." Franz Kafka, *Diaries, 1910–1923*, trans. Joseph Kresh, Martin Greenberg, Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 64. He goes on to emphasize their wandering lifestyle and the considerable cultural knowledge that they acquired in this way, adding that they are "Jews in an especially pure form because they live only in the religion, but live in it without effort, understanding, or distress." Kafka, *Diaries, 1910–1923*, 64. Kafka continued to be

According to Jeremy Adler, the influence of this group of actors on Kafka was considerable insofar as it enabled him to forge a sense of connection with Jewish religion and culture[97]; nevertheless, despite this newly found preoccupation with Jewishness (especially with Eastern Jewish traditions), he had no faith in the survival of Jewish rituals, which were "on their very last legs . . . have only a historical character."[98] He displayed a similarly ambiguous stance concerning Zionism: while in a letter to Felice Bauer in 1913 he wrote about his indifference towards Zionism ("I don't have the right sense of belonging"[99]), he saw his sister Ottla's dedication to this movement as a thing that gave him strength and hope (Hayman writes, quoting Kafka, that "'Ottla's Zionism' . . . held him 'literally together and give [him] some resolution and hope'"[100]). Whether this hope concerned the prospect of ultimately finding peace and resolution in religion remains unclear; what can be argued is that Judaism was for Kafka never a stable point of reference in his life.[101]

Returning to Kafka's relationship with his father, it is feasible to claim that Franz viewed Judaism as a lost opportunity to establish a sense of connection with Hermann; nonetheless, what initially may have been the hope of finding common ground with his father later turned into a sense of bitterness

inspired by the Polish Yiddish Musical Drama Company for several years to come, despite his father's strong criticism of the troupe, and especially their leader, Jizchak Löwy.

97 As Hayman writes, "He [Kafka] saw that Jewish theology, Jewish ritual, Jewish folklore, Jewish culture were intertwined in a tradition that was cut off neither from artistic expression nor from him." Hayman, *A Biography of Kafka*, 110.

98 Qtd. in Hayman, *A Biography of Kafka*, 123.

99 Hayman, *A Biography of Kafka*, 168.

100 Hayman, *A Biography of Kafka*, 168.

101 Kafka was alienated not only from Judaism, but also from himself. In his diary (entry dated 8 January 1914), he wrote: "What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe." Kafka, *Diaries, 1910–1923*, 252. Hayman comments that when Kafka was asked (in 1922) if he would succeed Martin Buber as the editor of *Der Jude*, he refused, arguing that "with my unbounded ignorance of things, total disconnection with humanity, and with no firm Jewish ground under my feet, how could I consider anything of the kind? No, no.'" Hayman, *A Biography of Kafka*, 282. In his dairy (entry dated 23 January 1922), Kafka compared his involvement with Zionism to an unfinished project in his life, putting it in a wider group of dissimilar interests: "piano, violin, languages, Germanics, anti-Zionism, Zionism, Hebrew, gardening, carpentering, writing, marriage attempts, an apartment of my own." Kafka, *Diaries, 1910–1923*, 404.

resulting from the conviction that Hermann had flatly refused to see his interest in Jewishness as valuable and genuine. In "Brief an den Vater," Kafka goes so far as to maintain that his newly found interest in Judaism had a negative impact on his father's approach to religion: "Through my mediation Judaism became abhorrent to you and Jewish writings unreadable, they 'nauseated' you."[102] This powerful statement attracted Gordimer's attention, who wrote on the margins of the text "Why? Explain," perhaps thinking of raising this point in her "Letter from His Father."

What Gordimer does mention in "Letter from His Father" is Hermann's strong criticism of his son's Judaism as inauthentic. As Hermann writes, "Your Judaism was highly intellectual, nothing in common with the Jewish customs I was taught to observe in my father's *shtetl*, pushing the barrow at the age of seven."[103] Gordimer's Hermann flatly rejects the notion that his religion has been corrupted by social change; on the contrary, he makes his claim to the authenticity of his religious faith by referring to its roots in the countryside. The reference to physical work in the quoted passage is not merely an addition but an important theme throughout his letter to Kafka insofar as he contrasts his own physical toil (first in the countryside and then—in Prague—as a shopkeeper), described as a hard but honest way of making a living, with Kafka's vacuous and fruitless flirtation with Jewish culture and tradition (as displayed by Kafka's friends, such as Jizchak Löwy).

Hermann's strong criticism of his son's attitude to Jewish culture is part of a larger accusation which stems from the contention that his son's intellectualism was essentially a failure to engage in the life around him. Hermann's accusation is founded on Kafka's irreverent way of writing about Jews,[104] and, more importantly, on his failure to address the pressing social issues of his times, such as the antisemitic acts of hooliganism on the streets of Prague. Hermann argues that instead of engaging with the present, Kafka chose to create monstrous fantasies of the future: "You were only *imagining* Jews. Imagining

102 Kafka, *Wedding Preparations and Other Posthumous Prose Writings*, 196.

103 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 46.

104 Hermann refers to Kafka's reaction to Max Brod's book *The Jewesses*, specifically to Brod's description of Jews, whom he compared to lizards. He quotes Kafka's *Diary*: "However happy we are to watch a single lizard on a footpath in Italy, we would be horrified to see hundreds of them crawling over each other in a pickle jar." Qtd. in Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 47.

them tortured in places like your *Penal Colony*, maybe. I don't want to think about what that means."[105]

On closer analysis, Hermann's comment on Kafka's writing is not only an accusation of Kafka's indifference to the fate of other Jews but also a broader claim which is related to the notion of the writer as a prophet. At the beginning of his letter, Hermann first alludes to the idea—commonly accepted, as he says—that Kafka was "some kind of prophet,"[106] and then he twists the argument by implying that Kafka's prophecies came true precisely because they were self-fulfilling:

> Some say you were also some kind of prophet . . .; after you died, some countries built camps where the things you made up for that story *In the Penal Colony* were practised, and ever since then there have been countries in different parts of the world where the devil's work that came into your mind is still carried out—I don't want to think about it.[107]

Hermann's characterization of his son as "some kind of prophet" is not without ambiguity insofar as it hints at a causal connection between his writing and the events that unfolded after his death. Whether or not Hermann is implying that Kafka's morbid visions served as an inspiration for the criminals of the 20th century is open to debate—what clearly transpires in his reaction to his son's writing is his conviction that any kind of confrontation with evil should be avoided by repressing such thoughts (characteristic of Hermann's unwillingness to confront evil is his repetition of the phrases "I don't want to think about it"[108] and "I don't want to think about what that means"[109]). Gordimer is treating the father as a foil to the son, using Hermann's dismissal of his son's works to create her vision of Kafka as a writer whose social commitment extended beyond his times into the future, and whose influence can be observed in the present.

Exploring the self-reflexive dimension of "Letter from His Father" in the context of Gordimer's non-fiction writing, we can find in her vision of Kafka

105 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 47.

106 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 42.

107 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 42.

108 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 42.

109 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 47.

clear elements of her views on the process of writing and the role of the writer in society, especially the necessity of detachment from socially and politically sanctioned ways of perceiving the world. In an interview by Diana Cooper--Clark, given in the same year that she published "Letter from His Father," she argued that "the writer shouldn't be pressed into any kind of orthodoxy."[110] For Gordimer, the rejection of the writer's allegiances—both artistic, political, and personal—leads to freedom, which she saw as the proper goal of all writers: "The taking of this freedom is both the bravest and the monstrous side of what a writer *is*."[111]

Another key notion—related to creativity—which is discussed in "Letter from His Father" is that of imagination. Gordimer's Kafka is a writer whose social involvement results not from his conviction that literature should reflect the social reality of his times but from the contention that it has its roots, as well as its power, in the faculty of imagination. Hermann's accusation that Kafka was "only *imagining* Jews"[112] and not writing about them—or to be more precise the hooligan attacks against them—may be read in the light of Gordimer's insistence on the role of imagination in the creative process, as expressed in her lecture "The Essential Gesture" (1984):

> The *transformation of experience* remains the writer's basic essential gesture; the lifting out of a limited category something that reveals its full meaning and significance only when the writer's imagination has expanded it.[113]

In Gordimer's view, imagination enables the writer to move beyond the immediate reality—such as the reality of present events—into that which lies beyond and can be evoked only in the process of writing. She returns to this topic in an essay titled "Witness: The Inward Testimony" (2006), in which, quoting Kafka, she defines the writer's role as "a seeing of what is really taking place."[114] Imagination, argues Gordimer, makes it possible for the writer to

110 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 228.

111 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 228.

112 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 47.

113 Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, ed. Stephen Clingman. (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 298.

114 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 688.

present historically specific events and characters in such a way that they acquire a universal meaning, or—to use her words—"enduring significance."[115]

The 1980s and the 1990s: Exploring the Father's Jewish Origins

Three years after writing "Letter from His Father," Gordimer published *A Sport of Nature* (1987), whose main character, Hillela, is of Jewish descent. Hillela's great-grandfather, Hillel, is described as an immigrant who, like Isidore Gordimer, escaped "the cossacks' pogroms"[116] to start a new life in South Africa. As is the case with other works discussed in this chapter, *A Sport of Nature* conveys the tension between involvement and detachment concerning the protagonists' Jewish legacy: while Hillela, named after her great-grandfather, takes little account of her Jewish origins, her cousin Sasha sees their common ancestor as an important figure and his Jewishness as a trait that is deeply embedded in both of them. Held in prison for his involvement with the ANC, Sasha writes a letter to Hillela, in which he makes the following point about their Jewishness: "It's in the blood you and I share. Since the beginning."[117] The awareness of his roots may be part of Sasha's identity, but the same point can be made regarding the awareness of his great-grandfather's failure to preserve Jewish traditions in his family: none of Hillel's granddaughters show genuine dedication to their faith; in fact, both Ruth (Hillela's mother) and Pauline (Sasha's mother and a major influence on Hillela) reject their family's values, the former abandoning her family to begin a life with her Portuguese lover, the latter choosing political involvement as a defining force in her life. Neither does Hillela's Jewish father, Len, abide by his family's traditions: after Ruth's departure, he marries an English woman, forgetting about his origins and effectively leaving his daughter to the care of her aunt, Pauline. In short, Jewishness in *A Sport of Nature* is a legacy that is either rejected[118] or suppressed.

115 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 688.

116 Nadine Gordimer, *A Sport of Nature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 323.

117 Gordimer, *A Sport of Nature*, 323.

118 In one of passages devoted to this topic, Pauline, Hillela's aunt, describes the dull and uninspiring life offered to Ruth by her husband's orthodox Jewish family: "There were the family dinners on Friday nights, the cake sales for Zionist funds, and especially the same old parties—weddings, barmitzvahs; those tribal Jews don't know what it is to enjoy themselves spontaneously." Gordimer, *A Sport of Nature*, 46. While Ruth rejects this life by choosing the company of her Portuguese lover, her decision finds justification in the eyes of her sister,

What Michael Wade describes as "the failed father in the Jewish family"[119]—the father who has failed to pass on his family's traditions to his children—is a figure that also appears in the autobiographical story "**My Father Leaves Home**" (*The New Yorker*, 7 May 1990; *Jump*, 1991). Inspired by Gordimer's visit to a Hungarian *shtetl*,[120] the story contains two interweaving narrative strands: the unnamed narrator's description of her journey to a small, unidentified town in Eastern Europe and the story of a man closely resembling Isidore Gordimer, specifically his immigration to South Africa, his early years in a gold-mining town, during which he was struggling to make a living as a watchmaker, and his difficult, ill-matched marriage to an Englishwoman of higher social standing.

As it is clear from the beginning of the story, the aim of the narrator's journey is to gain some form of insight into the past. This is evident in the following passage, where the narrator conjures up the image of her father as a thirteen-year-old boy, taking leave of his family to make a new life in South Africa. In the background of this poignant scene of parting, there are the noises of a drunken party in a nearby tavern:

> The man with the beard, the family head, was there. He was the one who had saved for the train ticket and ship's passage. There are no farewells; there's no room for sorrow in the drunken joy of the gypsies filling the bar, the shack glows with their heat, a hearth in the dark of the night.[121]

The striking shift from the past to the present tense, as evidenced in this passage, was the subject of an exchange between Gordimer and her *New Yorker* editor Linda Asher. In the margin of a proof copy of "My Father Leaves Home"—next to the passage just quoted—Asher asked Gordimer if it was her intention to keep the tense shift, to which Gordimer replied that this was indeed her goal in the story. The alternation between the present and the past has a self-reflexive dimension insofar as it points to the narrator's attempts to revive the past in her (and her readers') imagination. In those attempts, the

Pauline, who, despite being guided by different values, is clearly dismissive of the Jewish lifestyle she describes.

119 Wade, "*A Sport of Nature*: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject," 166.

120 Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen*, 34.

121 Nadine Gordimer, *Jump and Other Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 58.

present becomes an inspiration for acts of the imagination aimed at recreating the past as it could have been.

Imaginative excursions into her father's life are interwoven with scenes from the past that are deeply embedded in her memory, like his occasional visits to the synagogue for the commemoration of his deceased relatives:

> He went fasting to the synagogue on the Day of Atonement and each year, on the anniversaries of the deaths of the old people in that village whom the wife and children had never seen, went again to light a candle. Feeble flame: who were they?[122]

The father's Jewishness, suppressed by his wife's denigration of his poor Eastern European background, is little more than a remnant of his previous life. His visits to the synagogue are an attempt to reconnect with the world that he had left in the first years of the 20th century and that ceased to exists with the Holocaust. It is her father's past that the narrator tries to recreate in the story by imagining the dramatic historical events which affected his life and the lives of his relatives. Indeed, "My Father Leaves Home" reads like an exploration of postmemory insofar as the story concentrates on the narrator's reliving of a memory that belonged to the previous generations.

Towards the end of "My Father Leaves Home," the narrator describes her visit to a local cemetery, in which she sees a war memorial "crowned with the emblem of a lost occupying empire"[123] and headstones in total dilapidation. While this visit fails to inspire any insight into the past, save for the awareness of the inevitable passing of time and the demise of once-powerful empires, the participation in a hunting expedition yields dramatic images of death and destruction, which invoke a feeling of terror:

> Cracks of detonation and wild agony flutter all around me, I crouch away from the sound and sight, only a spectator, only a spectator, please, but the cossacks' hooves rode those pleading wretches down. A bird thuds dead, striking my shoulder before it hits the soft bed of leaves beside me.[124]

122 Gordimer, *Jump*, 64.

123 Gordimer, *Jump*, 64.

124 Gordimer, *Jump*, 66.

The exchange with Linda Asher on the proof copy of the story makes it clear that in selecting the verb "striking" Gordimer's intention was to compare the strike of a bird to a gunshot, as if the fall of the bird was a bullet fired at the narrator. Gordimer's comment about the intended effect of the bird's death on the narrator points to a shock, as she experiences in the violent death of the bird her own extinction. This, in turn, elicits images of human suffering and death caused by the pogroms. While there may be guilt in the exclamation "only a spectator, only a spectator" (the narrator is, after all, part of a hunting expedition that is wreaking havoc among the birds), the interjection comes across chiefly as a reimagining of the pleading victims, killed indiscriminately by the Cossacks. Deeply affected by the birds' violent death, the narrator feels as if she herself was about to be hunted down. In the last paragraph of the story, she describes her act of gathering the leaves onto which the dead bird had fallen: "I gathered the leaves for their pretty autumn stains, not out of any sentiment."[125] As we learn from the exchange with Asher, Gordimer's selection of the word "stains" was supposed to conjure up associations with "bloodstains," thus emphasizing the violent and traumatic nature of the events alluded to in the story.

In her article, Claudia Braude points out that in "My Father Leaves Home" Gordimer has failed to mention the massacre of Žagarė's Jewish community, adding that she "entirely circumnavigates this traumatic zone of Jewish experience and postmemory."[126] Braude attributes this omission to Gordimer's strong emphasis on anti-apartheid struggle, in which ethnicity (and race, for that matter) is relegated to the background. As Braude adds, at a late point in her life, Gordimer became aware of this tendency in her work: in the mentioned article "What News on the Rialto" (2001), she admits that as a result of her commitment to anti-racism, she "did not hear that other voice whose significance I've never pursued."[127] Gordimer made this comment specifically in the context of her family; indeed, she went on to add that while no child can boast of knowing their parents, it is immigrant parents in particular whose lives remain obscure (this generalization can be attributed to the fact that neither

125 Gordimer, *Jump*, 66.

126 Claudia Braude, "Repairing Cracked Heirlooms: South African Jewish Literary Memory of Lithuania and Latvia," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Modern Jewish Fiction*, ed. David Brauner and Axel Stähler (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 329.

127 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 585.

Nan nor Isidore commented at length on their pre-South African lives—as Gordimer notes, "we lived entirely in the present"[128]). Considering this brief autobiographical gloss, it can be argued that Braude's reflection on Gordimer's marginalization of her Jewish legacy is accurate insofar as it pertains to her family life, but this point cannot be made regarding the Jewish experience in general. While it is true that "My Father Leaves Home" lacks any detail that would make it possible to situate the narrated events in a specific time and place, it also makes unambiguous references to the tragic and traumatic experience of Eastern European Jews during the pogroms. By the same token, although the sudden insights into the pogroms, as described in the story, cannot be unambiguously classified as instances of postmemory (since there is too little insight into the narrator's relationship with her father to make this case), it is also true that the sudden emotional reaction on the part of the narrator during the hunting expedition does possess characteristics of an inherited trauma[129]: the narrator is so overwhelmed by visions of horror that she feels physically threatened. It can be concluded that what Braude describes as Gordimer's failure to address the Jewish experience is indeed a failure in the context of her family; nevertheless, "My Father Leaves Home" can—indeed, should—be read as a quasi-autobiographical insight into the Jewish experience and its influence on the second generation.

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128 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 585.

129 Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory in the following words: "It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove." Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," 106. Hirsch writes about two characteristic features of postmemory which are relevant in the context of Gordimer's story: its partial reliance on imagination ("Postmemory's connection to the past is . . . not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation." Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29 (1) (Spring 2008): 107, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019), and its strong influence on the individual ("Postmemory is not identical to memory: it is 'post,' but at the same time, it approximates memory in its affective force." Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," 109). Hirsch emphasizes the visual aspect of postmemory—a point that is also mentioned by Helen Epstein (see Helen Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversation with Sons and Daughters of Survivors* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 9), and by Eva Hoffman (see: Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 9). As Aušra Paulaskienė writes, postmemory, or "secondary witnessing," as she names it, was a common phenomenon among the second generation of Jewish immigrants to South Africa. Paulaskienė, "Memory of Lithuania in South Africa," 132.

The 2000s: "The Past is a Foreign Country"

Juxtaposing the stories discussed so far in this chapter, it can be argued that the historical events in their background are absent in the sense that they have either been repressed by the protagonists or—distant as they are—can only be reached by acts of imagination. In "**A Frivolous Woman**," published in her final collection *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black* (2007), Gordimer returns to the topic of persecution and privation as experienced by members of the first generation. "A Frivolous Woman" is the story of a Jewish woman, Grete, who experienced a series of dramatic events in her life (the loss of financial security in the years following Hitler's rise to power, the suicide of her husband, a forced emigration to South Africa, and an ill-timed return to Germany, resulting in a period spent in a resettlement camp in Senegal), all of which failed to change her positive worldview. This is, at least, how Grete is seen by her grandchildren, whose attitude towards her is mostly one of light-hearted irony, expressive of their bafflement that one could lead such an intensely private existence, tossed mercilessly by the shifting tides of history, yet always somehow seem unaffected by them. What stops this attitude from lapsing into open criticism is the contention that Grete was not serious enough to have been affected by history; quite simply, she was too silly to carry the burden of her generation. That the covert criticism is present in the story becomes apparent from its beginning, when, after Grete's death, her son and her adult grandchildren open a trunk with her private things, including the various costumes that she enjoyed wearing. As the family goes through Grete's belongings, one of the grandsons suppresses a thought that seems a tacit accusation levelled at his late grandmother: "She rescued this junk to bring along while others like her were transported in cattle trucks."[130] While this thought remains unuttered, it is significant insofar as it shows the perception of members of the third generation, who make two assumptions as to the first generation: first of all, history leaves a permanent imprint on the psyche of the survivors; secondly, this history is there to be shared with others. Those assumptions stand in contrast to Grete's priorities, as understood by her son:

130 Nadine Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 45.

> Although they had lived through devastating events together in their life, back there, she and her son never talked of them to one another, nor, for relief, in private confession to others; evidently she imposed this self-practise to be respected by him.[131]

Silence as a "self-practice" stands in stark contrast to the practice of confession, based on the double premise that experiential truth is communicable and that the subject wishes to share this truth with others. The central gap in Gordimer's story makes it impossible to tell whether Grete's silence stems from a subconscious desire to suppress traumatic memories or whether it is a more deliberate attempt to erase this part of her history from memory. If the latter option seems an overinterpretation and an unnecessary attempt to theorize Grete's silence, then we must ask ourselves whether this reaction is not influenced by the simplistic and partly arrogant attitude of her grandsons, from whose perspective much of the narrative is focalized. The statement "The past is a foreign country,"[132] quoted at the end of the story, points to the fact that since neither Grete's son nor her grandsons have any access to her past and the way in which it shaped her subjectivity, any kind of ethical judgment of her behaviour should be relinquished. It is no exaggeration to state that by the end of the story, this simple comment takes the form of an ethical imperative to respect the past, doing so not because the past is known but precisely because it is unknown and—in some cases—unknowable.

The 2000s: Conflicting Identities in Post-apartheid South Africa

If "the past is a foreign country," it is one that Gordimer's characters have to forget altogether to create a new life for themselves. The need to marginalize the past (be it one's own or that of one's family) is not invariably connected with social and economic aspiration or with the impulse to suppress the memory of a traumatic event, but it can also be an expression of political convictions. In *No Time Like the Present* (2012), Steven Reed, the novel's Jewish protagonist,

131 Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 51.

132 The sentence is taken from L. P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* (1953). Gordimer leaves out the second half of the sentence that opens L. P. Hartley's novel: "The past is a different country; they do things differently there." L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1913), 9.

pays little attention to his ethnic origins, partly because of his deep scepticism regarding institutional religion, and, more importantly, because of his political stance: as we learn, "he's removed by revolutionary distance from the maternal Jewish connection."[133]

Like the other protagonists of Gordimer's works discussed in this chapter, Steven lacks a strong sense of identification with his ethnic origins. Although he and his brothers, Jonathan and Alan, were circumcised, they were not brought up in a religious household, since neither their Jewish mother nor their Gentile father insisted on passing their family's traditions onto their sons. When Jonathan, once a convert to Christianity, turns to Judaism, deciding to organize a *bar mitzvah* for his son (despite the fact that the boy's mother is not Jewish), Steven is clearly baffled and does not accept his brother's argument that the new, post-apartheid era calls for different allegiances (as Jonathan maintains, "It isn't enough to be black or white, finish and *klaar*, the way it was, in the bad old days—you belong somehow to something closer . . . more real, you can, it's possible . . . right"[134]). The combination of determination and hesitance with which Jonathan expresses this view distances the readers from his stance; moreover, as Linda Weinhouse rightly argues, Jonathan's and his wife's political opportunism further decreases our sympathy for them. It is worth adding that while Jonathan stays in South Africa, he sends his son Ryan to London and helps him to establish his life there. The family gathering during which Jonathan announces that he will be financing a house for Ryan and his wife in England becomes an opportunity for Steven to reflect on his own idea to emigrate to Australia, thus leaving the economic inequality and political turmoil of his home country. While he considers emigration, including economic emigration, as a natural phenomenon, he and his black wife Jabu decide to stay on in South Africa. This decision is communicated on the last page of the novel and is reached only after all arrangements have been made to emigrate to Australia.

Commenting on Steven's decision to stay in South Africa, Weinhouse points out that "Steven's redemption comes only through the identification with Jabu's people,"[135] thus emphasizing his distance with regard to his Jewish roots. Nevertheless, it should also be kept in mind that Steven's decision to remain

133 Nadine Gordimer, *No Time Like the Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 25.

134 Gordimer, *No Time Like the Present*, 43.

135 Weinhouse, "South African Jewish Writers," 312.

in South Africa comes in the midst of a political discussion about the issues troubling the newly democratic country (such as social inequalities, institutional racism, widespread violence, and xenophobia with respect to impoverished immigrants from Zimbabwe). This heated debate—one of many in the novel—is the final proof of Steven's and Jabu's political involvement, which need not be considered solely in terms of Steven's identification with Jabu's people. Ultimately, their convictions turn out to be stronger than their desire to create a more peaceful and prosperous life for their family abroad.

Until her last works, Gordimer expressed her belief that national identity is reached through social and political commitment, also in post-apartheid South Africa. Nevertheless, it is significant that we do not know—not until the last page of *No Time Like the Present*—whether this sense of belonging will be strong enough to convince Steven to stay in his country. The uncertainty as to whether this kind of non-racial and non-tribal identity will be feasible in the changed socio-political circumstances is visible not only in *No Time Like the Present* but also in the story "**Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black**" (*Granta*, January 2006; *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 2007). While its main protagonist, Frederick Morris, is not Jewish, the story is worth mentioning here because it sheds light on Gordimer's approach to the question of national belonging in post-apartheid South Africa. In the most general terms, the story can be characterized as a description of a crisis of identity resulting from a growing feeling of social and political marginalization. Looking at the story from the perspective of its plot, "Beethoven . . ." is about the rather clumsy attempt of Frederick Morris, a biology professor at a local university, to seek political credentials for himself by trying to ascertain whether or not he has some black ancestry in his family (Morris suspects that his great-grandfather may well have had affairs with African women while he was prospecting for diamonds in Kimberley). The idea of searching for distant black relatives is born with the awareness that his one-time political involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle is no longer recognized by the younger generation and that he should find a more tangible (organic, so to speak) connection with the history of the country. This disillusioned stance is expressed in one of the key sentences in the story: "The past is valid only in relation to whether the present recognises it"[136]; thus the logical implication that one should forge a personal history that is acknowledged not by the previous but by the present generation.

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136 Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 7.

Ileana Dimitriu sees Morris's attempts to discover African relatives as primarily a pragmatic move, devoid of any deeper, existential motivations.[137] This reflection has some justification since such a politically self-validating gesture would be of value given the atmosphere of unrest at his university, but I would not go so far as to attribute it to a purely practical desire to secure a future for himself by adopting criteria that he criticizes. (Morris sees the adoption of such biological criteria of political credibility as a regression to racialism, which he fought against in the times of apartheid.) To begin with, it is dubious that Morris really considers his trip to Kimberley as a genuine attempt to seek credibility among the younger generation: he does too little research to seriously entertain the possibility of finding a relative, and his speculations on the DNA tests that he may run if he ever meets a possible relative surely cannot be taken seriously. There is the sense that Morris himself, pragmatic though he may be, is confused as to his own motivations.

When formulating any judgments of Morris's actions, it is important to keep in mind the metafictional dimension of Gordimer's story—the fact that "Beethoven . . ." begins with the act of creating its protagonist and thus emphasizing his fictional status. Morris is a fictional persona created by the narrator of the story, who has chosen not to reveal his own name, only introducing himself as a man with the same initials as his creation. The fact that the narrator has adopted the name Frederick Morris instead of using his own is not merely a simple strategy of hiding his identity, but it is also an attempt to reflect upon his doubts from a distance by projecting them onto another person. It is worth adding that "Beethoven . . .," apart from staging the creation of a fictional protagonist, also conflates the voices of the character and the narrator to such an extent that at times it is impossible to tell them apart. While most of the story takes the form of focalized narration combined with free indirect discourse, the following passage, which emphasizes Morris's confusion as to his place in post-apartheid South Africa, stages a conflation of the two voices:

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137 At one point in the story Morris plays with the idea that, following his intuition, he may come across a woman related to him by blood. Having done so, he will then run a DNA test to confirm that they are related. Referring to this idea, Dimitriu writes: "He [Morris] does so not because he believes this would make any difference to him existentially speaking, but rather for pragmatic reasons." Ileana Dimitriu, "Novelist or Short-Story Writer? New Approaches to Gordimer's Short Fiction," *British and American Studies* 18 (2012): 92.

> So where am I from.
> What was it all about.
> Dubious. What kind of claim do you *need*? The standard of privilege changes with each regime. Isn't it a try at privilege. Yes? One up towards the ruling class whatever it may happen to be. One-sixteenth. A cousin how many times removed from the projection of your own male needs onto the handsome young buck preserved under glass. So what's happened to the ideal of the Struggle . . . for recognition, beginning in the self, that our kind, humankind, doesn't need any distinctions of blood percentage tincture. That fucked things up enough in the past. Once there were blacks, poor devils, wanting to claim white. Now there's a white, poor devil, wanting to claim black. It's the same secret.[138]

Reading this passage, we may have the impression that we are moving from free indirect discourse, providing us with the narrator's insight into the thoughts of his protagonist, to a reflection that could equally well belong to the narrator, all the more so that the three last sentences are almost a mirror reflection of those at the beginning of the story. It seems that the narrator, like his protagonist, is torn between his criticism of the new, post-apartheid racialism (summed up in the phrase that "Beethoven was one-sixteenth black") and the growing awareness that his non-racialist convictions, based on his belief that one's identity is shaped in and validated through political and social commitment, may no longer constitute a sound foundation for his identity as a white person in post-apartheid South Africa. The conclusion of the story, in which Morris jokingly dismisses his colleagues' questions about his trip to Kimberley, conveys not only the failure of his mission but also his unwillingness to voice his doubts and frustrations as to his place in the country. Behind this impasse is the protagonist's and the narrator's painful sense of marginalization: the fact that they have little influence in determining their role in the wider group (here, the academic community). The question of attribution does not end with the narrator: indeed, reading this self-reflexive story—especially the passage just quoted—one has the sense that Morris's bitterness about the re-emerging racialism was shared by Gordimer.

138 Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 15–16.

Jewishness in Gordimer's Prose: A "Hieroglyph To Be Decoded"

Growing up in a house where the past was distant to the point of nonexistence, Gordimer never ceased to reflect on her legacy—both historical and cultural. As we learn from an interview with Jannika Hurwitt, given in 1979, while declaring herself an atheist, Gordimer was for some time interested in religious thinking and influenced by Simone Weil, especially her book *The Need for Roots*.[139] Gordimer may have been inspired by Weil's book, but she remained an atheist until old age. In the mentioned interview published in *Haaretz*, she is reported as making the following statement: "It is wonderful to be a religious Jew, says Gordimer, or religious in general. It offers an extraordinary comfort for all the things that happen to a person in his or her lifetime. But unfortunately, she says, she cannot make that leap of faith."[140]

Gordimer's approach to her Jewishness can be discussed in the context of one more story, "**Gregor**" (*The Guardian*, 4 December 2004; *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 2007), which she published one year before she gave her interview to *Haaretz*. "Gregor" is a unique work in that it closely resembles an essay in its reflective, if informal, tone and philosophical subject matter. Gordimer takes a trivial episode—the puzzling appearance of an insect behind the glass of her electronic typewriter—as the basis for her reflections on the creative aspects of the reading process. Since the mysterious appearance of the insect coincides with Gordimer's reading of Kafka's *Diaries*, during which she is reminded of his short stories, especially "Die Verwandlung," she promptly christens the bug Gregor and attempts to free the creature by having her machine dismantled by a neighbour. When it is finally taken to pieces, it turns out that the creature has disappeared, leaving behind it only "a pinch of dust.

139 What may have caught Gordimer's attention in Weil's book is her statement about the basic need of the human soul. As Weil points out in her chapter on the phenomenon of uprootedness, "of all the human's soul's needs, none is more vital than this one of the past." Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, trans. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 2005), 48. She then goes on to add that since "the past once destroyed never returns," the preservation of the past should become a strong imperative, "almost an obsession." Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 48. Weil's observation is, to some extent, reflected in Gordimer's fiction insofar as many of her stories—including the ones to be discussed in this chapter—concentrate on characters who confront events in the past, either through individual or collective memory, and, by doing so, realize the role of past events, sometimes pre-biographical, in shaping their identity.

140 Shiri Lev-Ari, "A Conscience Still Not Quiet," *Haaretz*, November 14, 2005, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/a-conscience-still-not-quiet-1.4881700.

One segment of a black leg, hieroglyph to be decoded.”[141] The discovery seems to prove Gordimer’s intuition that the creature may have been a figment of her imagination, constituting her own response to the experience of reading Kafka. Reflecting on this episode, Gordimer considers reading as an essentially creative act—“another kind of metamorphosis”[142]—which transforms one’s subconscious fears and desires, triggered in the process of reading a given book, into the reality that is perceived by the senses and the intellect. Viewed from this perspective, reading acts on the subconscious, which, in turn, gives birth to what she consciously does not recognize as her own and thus fails to understand: the “pinch of dust” that Gordimer mentions in her story remains mysterious insofar as it belongs to a realm over which the intellect has only the slightest control.

The fact that Gregor—a “hieroglyph to be decoded”—is present during the “intimate situation” of writing brings up a further self-reflexive dimension of the story, showing writing as a process in which the conscious and the subconscious are brought into play. A mysterious sign which refuses to be removed, Gregor can be taken to represent Gordimer’s attitude to her Jewishness, which remained a significant presence in her writing and continued to inspire her throughout her life.

141 Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 62.

142 Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 59.

Chapter Five

"The Way Human Beings Use Power in Their Relationships": Relationships between Women and Men

Power in Human Relationships

In an interview she gave in 1982, Nadine Gordimer argued that unlike the South African authors who were motivated to write because of political reasons, "I began writing out of a sense of wonder about life, a sense of its mystery."[1] The sense of wonder and mystery, which Gordimer saw as an inspiration for her writing, derived from her gift of exploring the complex and ambiguous nature of human motivations. Gordimer was interested in the intricate forces that bind people together—both the impulses that are apparent to the parties involved and those that remain unspoken, perhaps even undiscovered by her characters.

One of the most revealing comments on human relationships in Gordimer's prose was made by the writer herself, who, in an interview she gave in 1986, observed that one of the "central themes" in her short stories is "the way human beings use power in their relationships."[2] This brief but significant comment is indicative of Gordimer's sustained interest in how people inhabit—often unreflectively—privileged social positions, how they use their status to dominate others, and, finally, how the underprivileged react to being on the receiving end of this power dynamic. Considered in the context of family relationships, the quoted passage sets the agenda for Chapter Five and Chapter Six, both of which will focus on the unequal balance of power in the relationships between men and women (in this chapter) and between parents and children (in the chapter that follows).

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1 Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 211.

2 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 259.

The long list of Gordimer's stories that are devoted to male-female relationships can be broadly divided into two groups. The first group includes the stories that feature submissive women who are closely dependent on men, both materially and emotionally, shaping their lives in accordance with the wishes of their partners and the needs of their families.[3] Gordimer's stories also feature women who make efforts to challenge the domination of their husbands but who nevertheless fail to find self-affirmation and self-fulfilment outside of the reductive criteria imposed by the patriarchal order.[4]

It is important to note that even the stories that delve into the intensely private bonds between people are not devoid of a political dimension; indeed, Gordimer made no clear boundary between the personal and the political, believing that since politics has become an inextricable part of life in South Africa, to convey the truth about people living in this country, she cannot ignore this major force acting on her compatriots. In the late 1970s and the 1980s, as she evolved her conception of writing as both describing and—by doing so—taking part in social changes, she came to the conclusion that literary works are an adequate response to a given political situation only if they are an enactment and an exploration of life; in other words, only when they give us political, social, and psychological insight into the actions and motivations of the protagonists.

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3 A list of such stories, in which Gordimer explores chauvinist and racist attitudes towards women, includes: "La Vie Bohème" (*Face to Face*, 1949), "The Hour and the Years" (*The Yale Review* (40.2), 1950 [as "The Peace of Respectability"]; *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952), "The Train from Rhodesia" (*Trek* (12.1), 1947; *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952), "Friday's Footprint" (*The New Yorker*, 11 April 1959 [as "A View of the River"]; *Friday's Footprint*, 1960), "Native Country" (*Ladies' Home Journal*, February 1965 [as "The Proof of Love"]; *Not for Publication*, 1965), "An Intruder" (*The New Yorker*, 11 February 1967 [as "Out of the Walls"]; *Livingstone's Companions*, 1971), "Town Lovers" (*The New Yorker*, 13 October 1975 [as "City Lovers"]; *A Soldier's Embrace*, 1980), "Country Lovers" (*London Magazine* 16.3, 1976 [as "The Children"]; *A Soldier's Embrace*, 1980), "A Journey" (*The Irish Times*, 8 July 1989; *Jump*, 1991), "Mother Tongue" (*Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 2007), and "The Second Sense" (*Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 2007).

4 See the following stories: "The Talisman" (*Face to Face*, 1949), "The End of the Tunnel" (*The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952), "A Style of Her Own" (*Cosmopolitan*, December 1958 [as "The Lady's Past"]; *Friday's Footprint*, 1960), "Our Bovary" (*The New Yorker*, 28 September 1957; *Friday's Footprint*, 1960), "A Third Presence" (*Cosmopolitan*, July 1965; *London Magazine* (6.6., 1966); *Livingstone's Companions*, 1971), "The Life of the Imagination" (*The New Yorker*, 9 November 1968; *Livingstone's Companions*, 1971), and "You Name It" (*London Magazine* (14.2), 1974; *A Soldier's Embrace* (1980).

The discussion of selected stories will show that even those works that concentrate on private, rather than political, commitments can be read as commentaries on social changes in South Africa and—in some cases—events on a global scale. Moreover, it will be shown that Gordimer's stories become more political with time in the sense that politics is increasingly often presented in them as a force acting on the consciousness of their protagonists, shaping their beliefs and influencing their actions. No less importantly, beginning with the 1960s, politics in Gordimer's stories is a significant criterion according to which the characters' actions are evaluated (what I mean by politics here is the ways in which the characters respond to a given political situation).

Feminist Perspectives on Gordimer's Works

Reading Gordimer's interviews, articles, and essays, we may come to the conclusion that she was dismissive of feminism as an ideological and political stance, but at the same time she showed interest in some of the issues addressed by mainstream feminism. In her 1966 review of Simone de Beauvoir's second volume of autobiography *Force of Circumstance*, she observed:

> It is a man's world still, largely because men kept it to themselves so long, and because many women share in common with other oppressed peoples the development of a slave mentality and are the first to turn their red fingernails on their sisters who not only walk out on the seraglio but, worse, refuse the status of 'honorary males.' (De Beauvoir's phrase again)[5]

She concluded her reflection with the following words: "Feminism as such—whether in this negative or in its positive aspects—has become a bore."[6] That Gordimer was highly sceptical about the relevance of mainstream feminism in South Africa can be seen in her 1982 interview, in which she argued that the liberal feminism practised by white women in South Africa did not address the social and economic gap between the white and black population. Ruling out the possibility of an interracial feminist movement in South Africa, Gordimer observed: "The basis of color cuts right through the sisterhood or brotherhood

5 Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times, 1954–2008* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 144.

6 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 144.

of sex."[7] As she explained, black women had much more pressing problems to confront (such as disenfranchisement and poor living conditions) than the "piffling issues"[8] addressed by white feminists. Notwithstanding Gordimer's quick dismissal of feminism, we should not overlook the fact that she explored in her fiction some of the issues that were considered significant by second-wave feminist writers. Indeed, her deep scepticism concerning feminism has to be qualified by her lifelong interest in the position of women in South African society and her insistent critique of the patriarchal values governing middle-class families.

The task of debating Gordimer's feminism has already been attempted by a number of her critics, among them Dorothy Driver, Karen Lazar, Kathrin Wagner, Mary West, and Denise Brahimi. Gordimer's preoccupation with the unequal balance of power in an androcentric society is the focus of Dorothy Driver's essay "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women," in which Driver comments that Gordimer's "interest in the debased status of women in society" is evident in her prose from the beginning of her writing career. Driver's argument is that "relationships between men and women in Gordimer's fiction are generally characterized by inequality,"[9] with women frequently internalizing the male perspective. Driver claims that in Gordimer's later works there is "a shift . . . towards the portrayal of women who show more independence and self-sufficiency either within their marriages or, more important, while deciding to remain unmarried."[10] She traces a development in Gordimer's fiction from meek, subordinate women to those who show a greater degree of self-assertion, in political terms too.[11]

While Driver's 1983 article is affirming of Gordimer's stance as a feminist writer, later critical reactions are more cautious. Karen Lazar observes that

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7 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 203.

8 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 203.

9 Dorothy Driver, "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women," in *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer*, ed. Rowland Smith (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co, 1990), 184.

10 Driver, "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women," 185. Quoting Gordimer in a 1975 interview, Driver adds in an end note: "Gordimer is quoted as saying that although she does not see her women characters as moving towards 'liberated' status, she thinks they 'would now feel more confident, more sure of themselves.'" Qtd. in Driver, "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women," 202–203.

11 Driver writes in the context of Gordimer's novels: "Obviously, Gordimer's women become more politically involved in the struggle against apartheid during the course of her fiction." Driver, "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women," 185.

Gordimer's disparaging treatment of feminism stems from the rejection of liberal feminism as irrelevant insofar as it functions within the framework of the existing social and political system, offering no viable change to the situation of black and coloured women. Lazar notes that Gordimer's stance is close to materialist feminism,[12] adding that this conviction does not find a consistent realization in her short fiction. Lazar emphasizes the inconsistency of Gordimer's feminist stance: as she writes, "her fluctuating sympathy with or hostility to feminism follow no neat chronological patterns."[13]

Similarly to Lazar, Kathrin Wagner claims that Gordimer's critique of feminism—what she calls her "undoubtedly non-feminist stance"[14]—results from her narrow understanding of this phenomenon. In Wagner's view, Gordimer rejected "'liberal feminism,' whose broad agenda for the achievement of gender-equality within existing social structures had little appeal for a writer committed to radical social and economic transformation as a prerequisite for true political liberation."[15] While Wagner is right insofar as Gordimer's works show no hope of achieving gender equality without major social and political change, it would be a mistake to dismiss all too easily her engagement with liberal feminism. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that Gordimer's works incorporate the insights of both liberal and radical feminism.

Considering Gordimer's works in the context of liberal and radical feminism, it is worthwhile to come back to her comment on "slave mentality," which brings us to the topic of mainstream feminism. De Beauvoir formulated her reflection in the context of male-female relationships in a patriarchal

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12 Lazar quotes Lise Vogel's definition of materialist feminism as "[an assertion] that the key oppressions of sex, race and class are interrelated and that the struggles against them must be coordinated." Qtd. in Karen Lazar, "Feminism as 'Piffling'? Ambiguities in Gordimer's Short Stories," in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, ed. Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1993), 215. Also relevant in the context of Gordimer's stories—especially her early works—is Christine Delphy's comment on the economic pressure exerted on women to maintain the patriarchal system which underlies capitalism: "It is obvious that the situation of women … on the labour market, the super-exploitation of *all* women in wage work, is determined by the domestic situation of *most* women . . . , and, more precisely, constitutes an economic pressure towards marriage." Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard, "A Materialist Feminism is Still Possible," *Feminist Review* 4 (1980): 94.

13 Lazar, "Feminism as 'Piffling'?" 216.

14 Kathrin Wagner, *Rereading Nadine Gordimer: Text and Subtext in the Novels* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 72.

15 Wagner, *Rereading Nadine Gordimer*, 81.

society—a topic to which she devoted considerable attention in *The Second Sex* (1949; first translated into English in 1953). In a chapter titled "The Woman in Love," she writes about "irresistible temptations"[16] that the woman has to overcome to pursue an independent path in life. Taunted by the prospects of "enchanted paradises,"[17] women all too often choose dependence over autonomy, only to discover in the end that they were "fooled by a mirage."[18] De Beauvoir comes back to the topic of women's dependence in the last chapter of her work, where she writes about "a tradition of submissiveness"[19] among women, resulting from their economic dependence on men. In a capitalist society, de Beauvoir notes, women are tempted to trade their control over their lives and bodies for financial stability: "I have already said that it is an almost irresistible temptation for a young woman to be part of a privileged caste when she can do so simply by surrendering her body."[20]

De Beauvoir's insights into women's dependence on men in capitalist and patriarchal societies converge with Gordimer's reflections on what she saw to be white women's position in South Africa. In an interview with Karen Lazar, Gordimer made the following comment on middle-class women:

> Maybe white women have been conditioned to accept psychological oppression, but I have the impression, having been brought up here as a white female, that it seems to be what so many women really want, even young women ... There's a whole level of women here who acquiesce in their powerlessness to make decisions because they enjoy the protection, the dependency. They don't realise that it's terrible to be made dependent. But there are many advantages to it.[21]

Taking into account the fact that the mentioned interview was conducted in 1988, it is safe to assume that while Gordimer may have dismissed mainstream,

16 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 775.

17 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 776.

18 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 776,

19 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 814.

20 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 814.

21 The passage is taken from Karen Lazar's interview with Gordimer, conducted in 1988. Qtd. in Wagner, *Rereading Nadine Gordimer*, 75.

second-wave feminism—which, as we saw, she did as early as 1966—she did share some of its concerns.

Gordimer's stories can be discussed not only in the context of liberal, mainstream feminism but also against the background of more radical approaches to the issue of women's rights. Three feminist writers are especially noteworthy in this context: Germaine Greer, Kate Millett, and Shulamith Firestone. In *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Greer addresses the problem of women's material dependence on men, arguing that "the housewife is an unpaid worker in her husband's house in return for the security of being a permanent employee."[22] Greer debunks the notion of security, based both on economic and psychological dependence, claiming that "security is the achievement of the individual."[23]

The question of women's subjugation to the patriarchal order was also raised by Kate Millett. In *Sexual Politics* (1970), Millett characterizes women as "a dependency class who live on surplus. And their marginal life frequently renders them conservative, for like all persons in their situation (slaves are a classic example here) they identify their own survival with the prosperity of those who feed them."[24] While Millett's observation is closely connected with de Beauvoir's earlier comment on women's economic dependence on men, the rhetoric is reminiscent of Gordimer's formulation of this problem (the observation, made in her review of de Beauvoir's autobiography, that women have "a slave mentality"). More important than rhetoric is Millett's comment on women's conservatism; we can draw a connection between Millett's observation and Gordimer's powerful critique of women who object to those who "refuse the status of 'honorary males'" and, by doing so, challenge the patriarchal order.

Millett's comment on the conservatism of bourgeois women can be related to Shulamith Firestone's discussion of how white women implicate themselves in the racism inherent in the patriarchal system. In *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1972), Firestone argues that while some women decide to make common cause with racially oppressed groups in the liberation struggle, others take a wholly different path: "Instead they choose to embrace their oppression, identifying their own interests with those of their men in the vain hope that power may rub off . . . . This hopeless identification is the racism of

22 Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), 273.

23 Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, 276.

24 Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Urbana and Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 38.

white women."[25] She refers to this kind of racism-by-implication as "hysterical (but inauthentic) racism."[26] Firestone's comment is relevant in the context of Gordimer's short stories, whose female protagonists are often shown to adopt racist attitudes that result from their socio-economic position in the patriarchal family. In fact, the discussion of Gordimer's stories will show that this kind of racism is neither "hysterical" nor "inauthentic"; it is a consistent and purposeful stance that results from economic privilege and political quietism.

The 1950s: Women in the Patriarchal Order

Gordimer's stories often explore the ways in which the patriarchal ideology shapes female sexuality. Among the topics addressed in her works is the issue of how ideologically conditioned claims about sex are transmitted in the family and in the community (such as a group of peers, neighbours, and, more generally, a given social class), as well as the question of how these claims are internalized by the female protagonists, thus affecting their self-perception and their actions.

In her critique of the various ways in which women, especially married women and housewives, idealize physical desire, Gordimer is not far from second-wave feminist writers. This concern was famously raised by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), in which she analyses the influence of patriarchal ideology on American middle-class women in the 1950s and the early 1960s. Introducing Friedan into this discussion is apposite, considering the fact that many female characters in Gordimer's stories enjoy a privileged social position, with desires and frustrations similar to Friedan's middle-class housewives. One insight made by Friedan resonates in Gordimer's early work, namely the contention that American middle-class women, when faced with the lack of opportunities to involve themselves in goals and initiatives that transcend the confines of the household, have turned to sex in the illusion that it was capable of bringing them the fulfilment that they seek. In Chapter Eleven of *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan asserts that the ideological, patriarchal construal of women has led to the obsessive pursuit of sexual relationships, adding that this frustrated search for sexual satisfaction has resulted in

25 Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1972), 109.

26 Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 110.

the deterioration of relationships within the marriage. According to Friedan, middle-class women seek social status through their husbands' professional achievements and through the acquisition of various commodities—a comment which is reminiscent especially of Gordimer's early stories.

For Gordimer's female protagonists, physical desire is a promise of emotional fulfilment, which is closely connected with challenging the values that bind them to their families. Since Gordimer's women are invariably drawn to the former but often afraid of the latter, they become self-conflicted, holding onto their family as a source of stability while at the same time compensating for this decision by giving themselves over to physical desire and the promise of liberation that it brings. This is the case in "**The Hour and the Years**" (*The Yale Review* (40.2), 1950 [as "The Peace of Respectability"]; *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952), in which Gordimer explores the way in which the subversive power of desire is subjugated to social demands. The unnamed protagonist of the story is a woman torn between her need for change and the fear that this change will challenge the existing status quo on which she depends, both emotionally and economically.

Gordimer makes it clear from the beginning of "The Hour and the Years" that her protagonist's identity is deeply embedded in the conservative values of respectfulness and domestic propriety. A reciprocated attraction towards a man, leading to a fleeting moment of intimacy between them, offers the woman the following insight into what is referred to as "the cold barriers of common sense": "They had smashed them; she felt them melt away at the first touch; they were nothing, those barriers, nothing, only words: marriage, wife, convention."[27] The woman's epiphanic understanding of the nature of social values is nevertheless short-lived since what happens later—the sudden reestablishment of the social conventions between them, their awkward parting, followed by the reassertion of the old lifestyle—throws her intuition into doubt. Social conventions are indeed instituted in language, but their power is much stronger than the woman intuits in that tenuous moment of insight. Indeed, her whole life is testimony to the fact that these barriers can alienate a person from her own feelings, creating a sense of schizophrenic duality which one only recognizes in such a moment of acute perception.

27 Nadine Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent and Other Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), 44.

Desire in "The Hour and the Years" brings the false promise of liberation from social conventions, creating the illusion of a life outside of the conservative and patriarchal order. Gordimer neither defends these conventions nor undermines them, at least not in the sense of offering a viable way of contesting them (in this sense, she is certainly not a radical); what she does, rather, is to show the power of patriarchal ideology acting upon the individual consciousness. In the case of her protagonist, this influence ultimately results in the cultivation of a simple fiction about the provisional nature of this order: as we learn at the end of "The Hour and the Years," following her brief romance, the woman goes back to her duties as a wife and a mother, but she continues to hope that her life will eventually undergo a drastic change. The ultimate, bitter irony of Gordimer's story lies in the fact that even if the longed-for change really did present itself, the woman would not be able to embrace it since her life is too deeply embedded in the current status quo to risk its loss. The story leaves us with the image of a woman living in a self-serving fiction constructed and cultivated to dissolve her frustration and dissatisfaction with her role in the family.

Like "The Hour and the Years," "**The End of the Tunnel**" (*The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952) examines women's dependence on patriarchal ideology in the moment of conflict between the unnamed protagonist's allegiance to the existing social norms and her desire to redefine them in the context of her life. However, it should be added that "The End of the Tunnel" is unique in the group of Gordimer's early stories insofar as it features a woman who is bold enough to contest the social structures in an attempt to seek a sense of liberation and fulfilment in the relationship with her lover. The story concludes with her discovery that the new dynamic of man-woman relationship that she seeks, based on a more equal intellectual and emotional involvement, is, in fact, an illusion. The woman finds herself heavily dependent on her lover—"he became the whole world lifted clear of time"[28]—which, in turn, causes her to fear that her new commitment will only be a repeat of her previous relationship. This painful revelation leads to a feeling of entrapment, as the woman fears that she will not be able to effectively challenge the androcentric model of marital relationships in an attempt to create a new, more equal balance of power. Her state of passivity, in which she "sank back against the seat slowly and began

28 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 191.

pleating, fold on fold, the material of her dress,"[29] highlights a return to a state of childlike helplessness in which she is given over to the comforting authority of her partner. In his reassurance she finds comfort, as well as a sense of resignation resulting from the awareness that their relationship can easily degenerate into the one that she had had with her husband.

Summing up the discussion of "The Hour and the Years" and "The End of the Tunnel," it can be argued that sex in Gordimer's early prose brings the promise of an intimate bond with the other, which, in turn, creates an overwhelming impression of separation from the forces that shape society. This aspect of sex has been mentioned by Kathrin Wagner, who, referring to Gordimer's autobiographical comment on sexuality as a powerful way of establishing bonds with others,[30] notes that Gordimer saw sexuality as a means of escaping social pressures, and the same can be said of her female protagonists: "Throughout the ten novels[31] Gordimer's female protagonists similarly seek both to integrate themselves through a sexual connection and to find in the expression of their sexuality an escape from stultifying social pressures."[32] Rightly pointing to the influence of D. H. Lawrence on Gordimer's early prose, Wagner writes about Gordimer's "internalisation of the need for a Lawrentian *sensual* liberation from the restrictions of bourgeois respectability."[33]

If sex is a promise of liberation from social conventions, it is also often an illusory one. As we saw, in "The End of the Tunnel" Gordimer shows that even though her female protagonist is on the cusp of a new life with her lover, she is nevertheless plagued by the growing conviction that no private rebellions will challenge the patriarchal model of a male-female relationship. This awareness is shared by Helen Shaw, the narrator of Gordimer's first novel *The Lying Days* (1953), published one year after "The End of the Tunnel." At first, Helen's relationship with Paul Clark brings a promise of liberation from the life that

29 Gordimer, *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 193.

30 Wagner quotes from an introduction to a 1975 volume of *Selected Stories*, in which Gordimer observes that far from feeling socially alienated as a woman and an intellectual, femininity was for her "my only genuine and innocent connection with the social life of the town." Nadine Gordimer, *Selected Stories* (London: Cape, 1975), 10.

31 Wagner's book, published in 1994, encompasses all novels by Gordimer published until 1990 (*My Son's Story*).

32 Wagner, *Rereading Nadine Gordimer*, 88.

33 Wagner, *Rereading Nadine Gordimer*, 89.

she observed in her home town, "where all human relationships were seen as social rather than personal."[34] With time, however, Helen's relationship with Paul comes to resemble the model of a married relationship that she has rejected: spouses living in the comfort and isolation of their homes, each leading a separate existence. As Judie Newman notes, towards the end of their affair, Paul begins to display a patronising attitude towards Helen, leading to her realisation that "her flight from sexual paradigms has merely brought her full circle."[35] Unlike "The End of the Tunnel," this retrogression of a relationship that was intended to be based on equality and unity of purpose is connected with the political development of Gordimer's protagonist, as Helen becomes increasingly aware of Paul's conflicted and compromised stance towards the injustices of apartheid.

The stories discussed so far concentrate on women who are either closely dependent on men, emotionally or economically, or at the different stages of their rebellion against the model of family life and their role in it. In most stories, the unequal balance of power between men and women is rooted in the fact that one of the partners—almost always a woman—is for some reason denied the chance to develop her potential and directly address her ambitions. Whenever that happens—be it because of social pressure or miscalculated personal decisions—the result is that the balance of power is tipped in favour of the more privileged partner, who begins to dominate in the given relationship, imposing his will on the other.

While many of Gordimer's women are profoundly dissatisfied with their role in society, few entertain the possibility of challenging the existing balance of power in male-female relationships. Such private rebellions are presented as ineffective since they operate from within the patriarchal order, as internalized by the female protagonists. This tendency, which has been examined in the context of "The End of the Tunnel" (*The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, 1952), is also present in "**A Style of Her Own**" (*Cosmopolitan*, December 1958 [as "The Lady's Past"]; *Friday's Footprint*, 1960). At the narrative centre of the story is Clara Hansen's decision to break through the comfortable, anaesthetized existence of an affluent middle-class lady and confront the situation which has plagued her throughout the years of her marriage, namely her husband's notorious infidelity. Up until this decision, Clara lived largely in denial, trying to

34 Nadine Gordimer, *The Lying Days* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), 239.

35 Judie Newman, *Nadine Gordimer* (London: Routledge, 1988), 20.

explain away her husband's numerous affairs as a sign of his inborn weakness ("a chronic ailment that beset her husband"[36]) rather than as an expression of his exploitative and disrespectful attitude towards her. Nonetheless, as her anger and frustration grow, she decides to face the situation, which brings about a sense of empowerment. When she confronts her husband's lover, she experiences a moment of triumph in which she proves to herself her superiority over the other woman. It is this triumph—we are led to believe—that changes Clara's life, bringing her the self-respect and dignity for which she is later admired.

"A Style of Her Own" is an ambiguous story. The liberal humanist ethics underlying it—the belief in the transformative value of self-awareness—is compromised by the basis on which the protagonist builds her self-confidence: the fact that her husband's lover is not only poor and socially inferior to her but also physically unattractive. What is, on the surface, a story of bold self-assertion is, in fact, an ironic comment on Clara's inability to transcend the system of values ingrained in her by male-dominated bourgeois culture.

One characteristic shared by many women in Gordimer's early stories is that they are closely dependent on men for their self-esteem. This is also evident in "**Friday's Footprint**" (*The New Yorker*, 11 April 1959 [as "A View of the River"]; *Friday's Footprint*, 1960), published a year after "A Style of Her Own." The story concentrates on Rita Cunningham's relationship with her two husbands: Arthur, who early in the story dies tragically in a boating accident, and his brother, Johnny, a carefree man who marries Rita chiefly because he is drawn towards the stable and relatively comfortable life she offers. A moment of indiscretion leads to a crisis in which Rita, humiliated in front of her guests, is made acutely aware of Johnny's indifference towards her. This moment also brings about a total change of her self-perception: "She felt again, as she had before, a horrible awareness of her big breasts, her clumsy legs. . . . Tears were burning hot on her face and her hands, the rolling lava of shame from that same source as the blush."[37]

In her interpretation of "Friday's Footprint," included in a letter to Roger Angell,[38] Gordimer argued that Rita's love for Johnny, combined with the painful awareness that this love remains unreciprocated, generates shame. Unable

36 Nadine Gordimer, *Friday's Footprint and Other Stories* (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), 75.

37 Gordimer, *Friday's Footprint*, 27.

38 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 30 April 1958. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

or unwilling to attribute this emotion to the right cause, she comes to the false conclusion that it stems from her desire for Johnny that predated her first husband's death. This, in turn, generates guilt, which she fails to understand and so is powerless to counteract. It is worthwhile to add that the causal connection between shame and guilt is not exceptional in Gordimer's stories (it can also be observed in "The Hour and the Years" and "The End of the Tunnel"), and it often stems from the female protagonists' attempts to repress the emotions that they consider transgressive.

While the story was published in *The New Yorker* as "A View of the River," the first title proposed by Gordimer—and the one that she gave to its book edition—is "Friday's Footprint." She commented: "By the way, what do you think of the title? I called it FRIDAY'S FOOTPRINT because that seemed to me to have a nice double connotation—not only was she a sign of familiar life to the visitors to the hotel, but as it turns out, she was also proof that what seems assuring, because it is commonplace, also contains the painful complexities of our commonplace life."[39] The comment is illuminating in the broader context of Gordimer's short fiction, in which the unremarkable and the quotidian dimension of life is often shown to contain a complexity that transcends the readers' initial expectations. This search for the—often emotional—complexity in commonplace life, inspired by her early reading (especially the stories of Katherine Mansfield), remained Gordimer's goal throughout her career, irrespective of her evolving political convictions.

The 1960s and the 1970s: Relationships of Power and Domination

Gordimer's political radicalization, which in the second half of the 1960s manifested itself in her decisive rejection of liberal humanism, led to her increased preoccupation with what she described as "the things that politics do to people"[40] (to quote from her letter to Roger Angell, as discussed in Chapter One), and—more relevantly in the context of this discussion—to her stronger critique of the family model prevalent in white, middle-class households. In *Occasion for Loving* (1963), Gordimer has one of her female protagonists, Jessie Stilwell,

39 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 30 April 1958. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

40 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 1 May 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

voice growing impatience with the model of family relationships—the family as "the tight little bourgeois family unit"[41] functioning in South Africa at the time.

Arguably the most powerful critique of marriage as a social contract can be found in Gordimer's fourth novel, *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966). The female protagonist of this novel, Elizabeth Van Den Sandt, decidedly rejects the patriarchal notion of marriage ("the concept of marriage as shelter"[42]), based on women's acceptance of men's authority. Elizabeth's later relationship with Graham is an expression of her desire for a more equal balance of power between individuals and of her growing realization that this state of affairs is impossible because the contest for domination—both sexual and intellectual—is inscribed in the gender roles propagated by the essentially conservative South African society. Her growing attraction to Luke, a political revolutionary, is rooted in her need for a relationship built on honesty and political involvement—in this case, radical political actions aimed against the apartheid government.

While few female protagonists in Gordimer's short stories consider activism (let alone radical activism) as a way of building a new order, both personal and political, most of them, nevertheless, share Elizabeth's frustration with married life. This can be seen in the two stories discussed in this subchapter: "The Life of the Imagination" and "You Name It," in both of which Gordimer returns to the topic of physical desire as a force contributing to the loss of agency of the female protagonists and, ultimately, to their passivity. A powerful depiction of this dynamics can be found in "**The Life of the Imagination**" (*The New Yorker*, 9 November 1968; *Livingstone's Companions*, 1971). A key reference in this story is to Rainer Maria Rilke's semi-autobiographical novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, which Gordimer read in the late 1960s. In the second paragraph of the story, Gordimer describes the female protagonist, Barbara, by referring to a scene in Rilke's novel in which the young Malte Laurids Brigge, searching for a crayon under the table, notices—to his horror—an outstretched hand reaching towards him from the wall. Although Rilke's protagonist recoils from contact with the hand (symbolising the unknown), he looks upon the scene as a source of empowerment insofar as he realizes that it has elevated him above others, whose perception is confined to the material world.[43] Barbara,

41 Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 278.

42 Nadine Gordimer, *The Late Bourgeois World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 48.

43 "What is certain is that, little by little, a sad and weighty pride uprose within me. I pictured what it would be like to go through life filled with inner experience, in silence." Rainer Maria

who embraces Malte's vicarious revelation through literature, shares his stance, at least at the beginning of the story—similarly to him, she takes pride in the power of her imagination, and she is, like him, living an intensely private life in the silent conviction of her superiority as a person capable of seeing beyond appearances into the heart of things.

Unlike Rilke's protagonist, Barbara fails to fulfil herself through literature or art, choosing instead a more steady, albeit less inspiring, career path, ultimately settling down to married life with a man who offers her the financial security to pursue the life of a well-to-do middle-class housewife. As a result, Barbara lives a superficial and unintegrated life, or, more accurately, two lives: one in which she carries out her duties, enjoying the privileges of her social position as a wife of a successful architect, and the other, the titular "life of the imagination," in which she spends her time alone, in a *pondokkie* not far from her home. Longing to escape her comfortable but uninspiring life, she finds passion and a promise of fulfilment in a short-lived relationship with a handsome but rather dull family doctor. While her passion is genuine enough, its aim transcends their affair and is connected with her desire to cast away the banal and superfluous trappings of daily life in an effort to experience her existence in its nuance and dynamism. Rather than delivering its promise, the affair only pushes her deeper into self-delusion, as imagination becomes the only means of covering the dreary encounters with her lover and his instrumental use of her. The last scene of the story shows Barbara once again given over to her fantasies, in which the wind roaming through her empty house (her lover has just left) represents the disruptive—and destructive—force threatening to radically upturn her domesticated and highly ordered world. As Barbara lies in bed, she finds herself conjuring up in her imagination a sudden attack by black burglars:

> They would come in unheard, with that wind, and approach through the house, black men with their knives in their hands. She, who had never submitted to this sort of fear ever in her life, could hear them coming, hear them breathe under their dirty rag masks and their *tsotsi* caps.[44]

Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. Michael Hulse (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 62.

44 Nadine Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 121.

The manuscript version of this passage includes the word "fantasy" directly preceding "fear" in the first sentence ("fantasy fear"), strengthening the sexual dimension of Barbara's fears of being assaulted by the *tsotsis* (Gordimer is referring to the racist perception of black Africans as potentially threatening to white women). Armed with their knives, the *tsotsis* represent the ultimate threat to her life,[45] but they are also a promise of putting a quick end to the banal reality she has created for herself. That Barbara's "life of the imagination" should degenerate to the level of racist stereotypes shows how far she has travelled from her enchantment with literature and her artistic ambitions.

Similarly to "The Life of the Imagination," in which desire forces the female protagonist into a position of dependency rather than empowers her, the subduing power of desire is also evident in "**You Name It**" (*London Magazine* (14.2), 1974; *A Soldier's Embrace*, 1980). The story is narrated by an unnamed middle-aged married woman, who looks back upon her affair with a younger man. As is the case with the protagonist of "The Life of the Imagination," the pain of parting from her lover puts her into the position of a person entrapped by her own memories: "I remember that I walked around the house carrying the letter . . . , and I went into the bedroom and lay down on the floor in the darkened room with my legs open, spread-eagled on my own cross, waiting for him."[46] In this erotically charged image of female victimization, the woman-narrator presents herself as a sufferer—a martyr to her unfulfilled passion. The marital bedroom (the archetypical representation of middle-class sexual propriety) becomes the site of what seems to be profound frustration, which ultimately leads to the woman's decision to abandon her husband and children.

Compared to "The Life of the Imagination," the political references in "You Name It" are more general but no less important. First of all, it is worthwhile to note that the story is set on an unnamed island in the Indian Ocean, which the female narrator describes as "a kind of paradise, I suppose, the kind open to people who drill for oil or man air bases or negotiate the world's purchase

45 Pertinent in the context of "The Life of the Imagination" is Mary West's comment that "white suburban bourgeois English-speaking women" are "caught between a sense of entitlement and fear." Mary West, "Portraits in Miniature: Speaking South African Women in *Selected Short Stories* by Nadine Gordimer," *English in Africa* 37, no. 1 (May 2010): 79, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27807131.

46 Nadine Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 108.

of sugar or coconut oil."[47] The woman's dispassionate comment on the country in which she spent most of her life brings us to the topic of displacement. The protagonists of the story—the woman, the husband, and the lover—are geographically and politically displaced in that as former colonials in neocolonial states, they do not live in countries that they can call their own. It should be added that displacement also functions on a more personal level, as the woman, waiting in vain for the return of her lover, discovers that she is unable to create a sense of identity—a recognizable notion of herself with which she could feel 'at home.' As she writes, "I thought of him passionately as someone just as I was, ejected from the mould of myself, unrecognizable even to myself, spending nights in towns that while familiar . . . were not home."[48]

In a gesture characteristic to her, Gordimer brings together the personal and the political, as the woman's sense of aimlessness, made more intense by the frustrated desire for her absent lover, comes to denote the rootless lives of those colonials who are defined chiefly by their political and economic opportunism. As it turns out, the woman's husband belongs to this group since following the turbulent political events in the newly independent country, he has succeeded in ingratiating himself with the newly formed establishment. The woman, in turn, draws satisfaction from the fact that after a time of private turmoil, she has decided to come back to her husband, embracing a life of comfort and prosperity. That this life is as superficial and devoid of purpose as it was before her affair is inconsequential; what matters to the woman is that it is largely a continuation of the privileged existence that she led before the political changes. Insofar as the woman's materialistic attitude is expressive of the group that she represents, "You Name It" conveys Gordimer's criticism directed at those colonials whose objective is mostly to derive benefits from the neocolonial changes in their countries.

Considering the stories analysed so far in this chapter, it can be argued that Gordimer's critique of patriarchal ideology, as internalized by her passive female protagonists, comes at a cost. First of all, as both Lazar and Wagner observe, she has failed to acknowledge the political potential in feminist movements. The second argument to be raised here is reminiscent of Meredith Miller's incisive critique of the ways in which physical desire is presented in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique.* Miller's justified claim is that Friedan

47 Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, 107.

48 Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, 110.

refuses to see the empowering aspects of feminine desire, treating it as a sign of women's entrapment in the patriarchal order based on the notion of passive and subservient femininity: "female promiscuity becomes the unhealthy sign of intellectual repression, but never a remedy for the problem of the housewife's particular 'state of instability.'"[49] Miller's critique of Friedan can be related to Gordimer in that by capitalizing on the construal of passive femininity against the background of patriarchal discourse, she often fails to locate the crucial moments in which her female protagonists may find or regain agency, not to mention a sense of control over their lives.

In Gordimer's works, desire often leads her female protagonists to experience the intensity of a given moment; it can also be connected with boldness and attentiveness in the encounter with the other person—an ethically admirable stance, even if it is rarely reciprocated in her stories. That said, one has the impression that desire in Gordimer's stories serves two main purposes: it is a topic that enables her to write about power and domination in male-female relationships, and it is a celebration of the way in which people create an intense but short-lived sense of togetherness, which may serve as a refuge from reality, but it rarely translates onto viable and positive change in their lives.

Gordimer's interest in desire as a force that is disruptive of social conventions but ultimately subjected to them can also be explored in "**Rain-Queen**" (*Cosmopolitan*, March 1969; *Livingstone's Companions*, 1971). The story is a fictional elaboration of what it presents as a Congolese saying: "When the rain comes, quickly find a girl to take home with you until it's over."[50] In the story, the narrator—a mature woman at the time of writing—looks back upon her first love affair, which she had as a nineteen-year-old girl with a married man when she was staying, with her parents, in the Congo. The way in which she writes about desire is evocative of other works by Gordimer in so far as she

49 Meredith Miller, "The Feminine Mystique: Sexual Excess and the Pre-Political Housewife," *Women: A Cultural Review* 16, no. 1, (2006): 6, https://doi.org/10.1080/09574040500045573.

50 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 155. Gordimer explained the origin of the story in a 1973 interview with Stephen Gray: "And the whole story came to me from a tiny thing, a saying somebody told me of in the Congo, about eight years before I wrote that story. They told me that when it rained in the afternoons a Congolese would say: Little shower, just time for a girl. And then go off and find some little girl, and the affair lasted just for the hour the rain lasted. And it's from that germ that that story came." Qtd. in Dorothy Driver, "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women," in *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer*, ed. Rowland Smith (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co, 1990), 203.

describes her love affair as an escape into "another world,"[51] which is sustained only in the intensity of the passionate relationship between two people. Having no point of reference in her young life, the woman sees her affair with an essentially egoistic and chauvinist man as the most intense and overwhelming experience of her youth. As she writes about her lover, "I was entering the world from my childhood and could not conceive that, as adults did—as he did—I should ever need to find surcease and joy elsewhere, in another world."[52] For her, the "another world" of their love affair—the world that runs parallel to the socially acceptable reality of her milieu—is the only one that is real since it is only in her relationship with the man that she experiences happiness and fulfilment. What is interesting is that neither of these feelings is rooted in a genuine understanding between the two people; it is as if the physical relationship between them was so intense that no other form of communication was necessary.

Gordimer wrote that "Rain-Queen" is "about corruption. Of a child by grown-ups."[53] If that is the case, then it is a corruption understood also as a brief but well-absorbed lesson in hiding one's emotions. What the young woman learns from her lover during their short-lived affair is to draw a strict boundary between their relationship and the social life of their community, between her newly found role as a passionate lover (the eponymous "Rain-Queen") and her identity as a young, unmarried woman (the daughter of her overprotective parents), and, finally, between her emotions—expressed in the intimacy of their encounters—and everyday communication with others, including her lover and his wife. What she learns, in short, is to compartmentalize her emotions, separating passion from everyday life and, in this way, ridding it of its transformative potential. There is a note of disillusionment in the last, paradoxical sentence of the story: "It *is* another world, that dream, where no wind blows colder than the warm breath of two who are mouth to mouth."[54] The discussion of "Rain-Queen" points to a key ambiguity in Gordimer's approach to physical desire: while some of her stories convey true fascination with the joys of sex, as well as with the energy and boldness with which it is often connected, there

51 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 163.

52 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 160.

53 Qtd. in Driver, "Nadine Gordimer: The Politicisation of Women," 190.

54 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 163.

is also deep awareness of the manipulations and self-deceptions that assist relationships based on physical intimacy, however satisfying they may be.

The 1970s: Exploring the Connections between Racism and Sexism

Gordimer's stories published in the 1970s, while many of them concentrate on the private lives of their protagonists, are increasingly political in the sense of having politics as a background but significant presence. This tendency is clearly visible in the diptych "Town Lovers" and "Country Lovers." Those two stories about interracial relationships were written in the early 1970s and submitted to *The New Yorker* in March 1975. The stories met with a mixed response. Roger Angell, while expressing his admiration for the first story in the diptych, criticized both for being "case histories."[55] He also noted that were the two stories printed together, the second would have a detrimental effect on the first: "I felt that the two together diminish the people in the stories, and turn their lives into a political statement."[56] Gordimer's response was to embrace the term "case histories" as an accurate description of what she had set out to achieve in both her stories: "the reality behind the legal case history."[57] The term "case history" is an apt description of both mentioned stories, in which Gordimer adopts a detached narratorial perspective in a dispassionate and meticulous analysis of the impact of apartheid on personal relationships, specifically the ban on interracial sexual relations, which existed in South Africa from 1949 to 1985.[58]

In the first story in "**Town and Country Lovers**" (*The New Yorker*, 13 October 1975 [as "City Lovers"]; *A Soldier's Embrace*, 1980), Gordimer writes about the connection between racism and sexism by showing how they intersect in the treatment of a coloured woman by a white man. At the centre of the story is the relationship between Dr Franz-Josef von Leinsdorf, an Austrian

55 Roger Angell to Nadine Gordimer, 11 April 1975. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

56 Roger Angell to Nadine Gordimer, 11 April 1975.

57 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 20 May 1975. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

58 The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) imposed a ban on marriages between white South Africans and people of other race groups. The Immorality Act (1950) extended this ban to sexual relations between white and non-white citizens. The Immorality Act was repealed in 1985 by the Immorality and Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Amendment Act, which allowed interracial relationships and marriages.

geologist temporarily working in South Africa, and a coloured woman, a cashier in a local supermarket, who remains unnamed and is referred to simply as "the girl." The woman seems attracted to Leinsdorf, but it is on his initiative that her daily visits to deliver groceries become the starting point of an affair. For Leinsdorf, the girl is primarily perceived as a body, which is attractive insofar as it is unlike the bodies of other African women ("She was rather small and finely-made, for one of them"[59]). In contrast to white women, the coloured woman's attractiveness lies in the fact that an affair with her can be conducted entirely without social consequences—or this is at least the expectation of the male protagonist. When the woman announces to him that she wants to return home for the night, naming her mother as the reason for her hurry, Leinsdorf dismisses this explanation on the basis of his unexpressed conviction that since she is probably promiscuous, her mother would not be surprised by her nighttime absence. This conviction, which has no rational grounding, is based on the racist belief that since interracial relationships do not belong to the fabric of social life (they are illegal and so do not have any right to exist), black and coloured women who decide to enter into them are effectively little more than prostitutes.

"Town Lovers" represents the female experience through its use of space. Gordimer is quick to emphasize the woman's disempowered position by describing her sense of confusion at arriving in Leinsdorf's flat: "Her eyes went over everything in the flat although her body tried to conceal its sense of being out of place by remaining as still as possible."[60] The forced immobility of the body—a stance of helplessness—is mirrored at the end of the story, when the girl takes shelter in a wardrobe in the vain hope that the policemen who raid Leinsdorf's flat will not find her. The woman, dressed hastily in a combination of her own clothes and her partner's, is forced out of the wardrobe, taken to a police station, and stripped for medical examination. By the end of the story, her exposed body becomes proof of the woman's crime and the most visible manifestation of her shame.

In the three-paragraph coda of the story, written in the style of a succinct newspaper report, after short biographical notes on Leinsdorf and the woman, the court case is summed up and the suspects' statements quoted. While the woman's statement is little more than what was expected of her in this situation

59 Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, 76.

60 Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, 77.

(a guilty admission that a sexual relationship between them did indeed take place), it is what the man says that casts light on their unequal and ill-fated relationship. Leinsdorf, who is presented as "the grandson of a baroness,"[61] is quoted as saying that "he accepted social distinctions between people but didn't think they should be legally imposed."[62] Leinsdorf's point is that while it is wrong to legally sanction social divisions, they are a natural occurrence in any society. Spoken in the context of apartheid South Africa, his words are unambiguously racist in that, despite his mild critique of apartheid legislation, they justify class and racial divisions. Leinsdorf's comment reveals his racially biased and abusive treatment of the woman, whom he clearly considers his social inferior.

The second part of the diptych "**Town and Country Lovers**" (*London Magazine* 16.3, 1976 [as "The Children"]; *A Soldier's Embrace*, 1980) describes the relationship between Paulus Eysendyck, the son of an Afrikaner farmer, and an African girl, Thebedi, whose parents are servants at the Eysendyck farm. Before we are presented with the story of Paulus and Thebedi, the narrator offers a one-paragraph gloss on the way in which cross-racial relationships are regulated, culturally and politically, in apartheid South Africa: in their childhood, black and white children are allowed to play together, but once the white children enter school, the relationship between them and their African peers is gradually loosened, as the status-based differences between them (such as their growing gap in education) become more pronounced.

The short-lived affair between Paulus and Thebedi is presented as abnormal in that it does not conform to the logic set out in the first paragraph of the story. What brings them together when they are in their late teens is the result of a lifelong understanding and closeness. The physical intimacy between the two brings them mutual satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment which transcends cultural differences; indeed, their shared childhood and youth constitute a firm basis for what might otherwise have been a lasting relationship. It is only when Thebedi becomes pregnant with Paulus's child, thus threatening his position in the white community, that their relationship is turned into one based on the power and authority of the man. After Paulus murders their child, the two are taken to court, where Thebedi exposes Paulus's crime, only to have her version of the story undermined by the suspicion that she was not a victim but an accomplice. When the two are released to the infamy of their

61 Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, 84.

62 Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, 84.

respective communities, they are quoted in the local newspapers as distancing themselves from the affair. The last sentence of the story, uttered by Thebedi and reprinted in a Sunday newspaper ("It was a thing of our childhood, we don't see each other any more"[63]), takes us back to the logic set out in the first two paragraphs: it has been proven that the relationship between Paulus and Thebedi was unnatural and abnormal.

"Country Lovers" shows that Gordimer's main objective was to blend fiction with reportage and, in this way, convey the reality of the situation behind the legal context. It is worth noting that the story of the affair between Paulus and Thebedi, the tragic death of their child, and the trial is closely modelled on real events as they were reported by South African newspapers[64] in July 1974. As is the case in the story, neither the white man nor the black woman was charged with the crime due to insufficient evidence; the woman's testimony against the man was dismissed since there was suspicion that she had perjured herself by contradicting the details in her account (in the real court case, she first claimed that she saw the man pouring an unspecified liquid into the baby's mouth, only to maintain later that she only saw the man putting a bottle with the liquid into his trouser pocket).

Commenting on "Town and Country Lovers," Pascale Tollance makes a more general point about what he sees as a certain dissonance in Gordimer's stories, deriving from "the tension between the ambiguous situations Gordimer's narratives build and the straightforward outcomes that they sometimes reach."[65] This discrepancy, Tollance comments, can be read as a commentary on the socio-political situation in South Africa: "Nuances and intricacies may have to be treated as irrelevant when considering the crude racial divide which is at the heart of every story."[66] Apart from the unnecessary (and untrue) generalization about racial divisions at the centre of all stories by Gordimer, Tollance's interesting observation is pertinent in the context of the mentioned diptych. The endings of both stories in "Town and Country Lovers" do indeed point to the outrageously reductive nature of social interaction under apartheid, but it

63 Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, 93.

64 *The Rand Daily Mail* (18 July 1974) and *Sunday Times* (21 July 1974).

65 Pascale Tollance, "'[S]he Has a Knife in [Her] Hand: Writing/Cutting in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories," in *Nadine Gordimer: De-Linking, Interrupting, Severing, Commonwealth Essays and Studies* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 30, https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.413.

66 Tollance, "'[S]he Has a Knife in [Her] Hand,'" 30.

is worthwhile to add that they also have a metafictional dimension insofar as they comment on what Gordimer saw as the unique contribution of writers—their insight into their characters' motivations. By juxtaposing two kinds of narratives (one offered in literature and one closely resembling a newspaper report), Gordimer makes a tentative reference to the surface-depth binary, which she used to emphasize that the goal of literature is to convey the experiential truth about people inhabiting a given time and place.

The 1980s: Arguing for a More Socially Inclusive Perception

The 1980s was a time when Gordimer sought to create in her fiction a wider socio-political perspective. In an address she gave at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1980, she argued that this attempt should not be exclusive to writers but common to all South Africans. Speaking to the graduates of this university, she called upon them to adopt a more socially inclusive way of looking at life in their country:

> To attempt to be fully human in South Africa it is necessary ... to view your private experience in relation not only to the section of society, the enclave in which it has been accumulating, but in relation to the complexity of the society as a whole in which you live.[67]

Gordimer's call to abandon an insular perspective, which separates one's life from its broader context, echoes in her eighth novel, *July's People* (1981), in which she shows the dependence of gender roles on the social and political forces that shape society at large. When the white protagonists of the novel, Maureen and Bamford Smales, find themselves reduced to the role of refugees in the village of their former servant, July, they gradually realize that their perception of each other has changed because of the radically different surroundings. By exposing Maureen and Bam's sense of estrangement from their own selves—their identity as a married couple and parents of two children—Gordimer explores their dependence on the social and political forces that they had taken for granted before they arrived in July's village. The novel encourages its readers to adopt—even if only for the time of reading—a stance

67 Nadine Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History: Notes from Our Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 133–134.

of detachment as a step towards transcending the socially insular vision that she challenged in the mentioned lecture.

Seeing one's life in a larger socio-political context is Gordimer's agenda also in her stories—not necessarily only those set in Africa. In "**Sins of the Third Age**" (*Cosmopolitan*, August 1982; *Something Out There*, 1984), published one year after *July's People*, she describes the history of a marriage between two post-war immigrants to a Western country, probably England. As we learn from the opening paragraphs, in their childhood Peter and Mania experienced the horrors of the Second World War, including hunger, deprivation, and violence, as well as the total destruction of their hometown. Bound by their sense of common purpose, they have gradually created a comfortable and insular life for themselves. The result of their financial prosperity is that they begin to treat the political changes in their adopted country—the contest between conservative and socialist parties—solely in terms of their well-being, ignoring the fact that the party they support is criticised for its neocolonialist treatment of immigrants from poorer countries. This kind of short-lived memory shown by former immigrants is perhaps the most serious transgression of the titular "sins of the third age."

Gordimer's emphasis in the story is on her protagonists' reluctance to create a sense of belonging which would transcend the immediate needs and interests of their family. Their narrow and self-interested understanding of political allegiance (voting for the party that accepted them as immigrants and that does not threaten to raise taxes) is the best proof of their failure to see themselves in the wider context of social and political changes. This blinkered approach can be viewed as the result of their traumatic history, but it is also—and to a larger extent—a failure of empathy, which consists in their disinclination to transcend the narrowness of their perspective. Their decision to emigrate to Italy for their retirement, leaving their children behind and moving all their financial assets to that country, shows that their war legacy of self-reliance has degenerated into the kind of self-centredness in which the desires and aspirations of two people constitute their entire world.

"The Sins of the Third Age" may be read as an ironic critique of the kind of insularity and egoism that isolates one from the wider national or global context (it is characteristic that Mania attends, in the role of an interpreter, various conferences organized by the WHO and the UN, treating them primarily as a source of income). More positively, it is an expression of Gordimer's view

about the necessity of a wider social and political commitment. This commitment is shown to be essential on the individual level insofar as it gives one the kind of reassurance that transcends the inherently unstable realm of one's personal life. Mania's failure to forge this kind of wider, non-insular identity leads to a state of passivity and helplessness when Peter dashes their plans of a comfortable and peaceful retirement by entering into an affair with an Italian woman. Overcoming the initial shock at learning about her husband's affair, Mania makes the unexpected decision to join him on their newly acquired Italian farm, trying to rescue their marriage despite Peter's attraction towards another woman. When she learns that Peter's affair has come to an end, the news gives her neither comfort nor satisfaction but "a desolation" and "the sense of being bereft."[68] Her hope that their world of comfort and prosperity, to which she has devoted her life, will ensure them a happy future is suddenly frustrated, leaving her in a state of passivity. The image of the helpless wife and the resigned husband, who spend their days in a kind of intellectual and emotional torpor, stands in strong contrast to their description at the beginning of the story.

The 1990s and the 2000s: Private Lives, Global Contexts

Gordimer's insistence on the importance of viewing one's life in a larger social and political context was reflected in her works published in the 1990s, in which she examined the effect of globalization on the everyday life of her characters. In "**Some Are Born To Sweet Delight**" (*Granta*, April 1991; *Jump*, 1991), she explores the threats connected with the global problem of social injustice by describing the relationship between Vera, a nineteen-year-old girl from the British working class, and Rad, an Arab immigrant and covert terrorist. Inspired by the Lockerbie bombing of 1988, "Some Are Born To Sweet Delight" is a story about the tragic consequences of misguided trust built on little more than the illusion of understanding. The relationship between Vera and Rad rests on Vera's faith in the power of love to overcome cultural differences and to construct the kind of total understanding with Rad promised by their shared moments of passion. Living her life in the intensity of the present, Vera takes little interest in the outside world, dismissing politics as irrelevant to her life

68 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 77.

("nothing to do with her"[69]). Her perception of Rad's country as remote, exotic, and thus safely removed from her immediate reality makes it impossible for her to appreciate Rad's strong emotions, especially his thinly veiled outrage at the social inequalities in his country, perpetuated by globalism (reacting to Vera's simplistic perception of his country as a land that has palms, he offers the following description: "Yes, nightclubs, rich people's palaces to show tourists, but there are also factories and prison camps and poor people living on a handful of beans a day."[70]) Vera's naïve sleight-of-the-hand dismissal of politics emphasizes the main theme of the story, which is that of the unexpected and tragic intrusion of the political into the personal: at the end of the story, Vera unwittingly smuggles a bomb onto a plane, which explodes mid-air, killing all passengers on board.

The political message of Gordimer's story is strengthened by the overt reference to the last two lines of Blake's 1803 poem "Auguries of Innocence," whose speaker, shocked by the moral degradation of the world, creates a vision of reality in which divine justice is meted out against the oppressors. The reference to Blake's poem adds a prophetic tone to Gordimer's story, emphasizing the message that oppression aimed against the world's underprivileged will inevitably lead to a counterreaction. The significant difference is that while in "Auguries of Innocence" justice is not only swift but also directed at those most culpable, Gordimer's story shows the tragic embroilment of the ignorant and the innocent in socio-political changes which they have done little to shape.

"Some Are Born To Sweet Delight" can be read as Gordimer's prediction—unsettlingly accurate, as the next decade would show—about the possible consequences of unequal economic and cultural development of countries around the globe. That Gordimer viewed this as one of the most pressing problems of mankind is evident in her post-1994 lectures and essays, in which she emphasized the importance of sustainable development not only in terms of economy but also education and culture. In her lecture for the United Nations Development Programme in 1997 "Labour Well The Teeming Earth," she spoke about the issue of illiteracy, which she called "the basis of global cultural deprivation."[71] In "A Letter to Future Generations" (1999), she made the point that while globalization had unquestionable significance for the world of finance,

69 Nadine Gordimer, *Jump and Other Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 74.

70 Gordimer, *Jump*, 76.

71 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 553.

the real question was whether this tendency would contribute to the narrowing of the economic gap between the rich and the poor. She went on to argue that rampant consumption, enabled by globalization, had had no such effect so far in that it had "in some aspects undermined the truly human prospects for globalisation: sustainable development for all."[72]

Gordimer's concern with unequal development around the globe can also be observed in her thirteenth novel, *The Pickup* (2001), which describes the relationship between Julie Summers, a South African woman from the upper middle class, and Ibrahim ibn Musa (referred to as Abdu), an Arab immigrant who works illegally in South Africa. Abdu is a man torn between a sense of belonging to his native country and a desire to seek a life of peace and prosperity in the countries of the Western world. As he explains to Julie,

> World is their world. They own it. It's run by computers, telecommunications—see about it here—the West, they own ninety-one percent of these. Where you come from—the whole Africa has only two percent, and it's your country has the most of that. This one?—not enough even to make a figure! Desert. If you want to be in the world, to get what you call the Christian world to let you in is the only way.[73]

While Abdu is ultimately successful in his attempts to obtain the status of an economic refugee, it is far from certain that his determination to gain access to what he calls "the Christian world"[74] will grant him what he desires: his own place in the Western world. Accepting the notion of progress as the accumulation of capital, Abdu is also deeply embittered by the enduring domination of the West in the form of neocolonialism and by the economic and political inequalities between countries of the global south and the north.

The 1990s and the 2000s: Personal Ties and Private Ambitions

As I noted in Chapter Three, Gordimer's post-apartheid writing is characterized by the anticipation of a new socio-political order and the growing conviction that its arrival may require a reshaping of one's personal goals. This argument

72 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 553.

73 Nadine Gordimer, *The Pickup* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 160.

74 Gordimer, *The Pickup*, 160.

was discussed in the context of Gordimer's eleventh novel, *None to Accompany Me* (1994), and it is to this novel that I would also like to refer in the discussion of relationships between men and women in Gordimer's stories. In *None to Accompany Me*, the marriage crisis between Vera Stark and her husband Bennet is connected with Vera's decision to devote herself to legal work connected with drawing up a new constitution for post-apartheid South Africa. It is around this task that Vera decides to organize her life, even though this decision leads to personal sacrifices, such as the breakdown of her relationship with Bennet. Nevertheless, it is important to add that the crisis in their marriage is a longer process, which has its seeds in Ben's excessive dependence on Vera. In his silent expectation that his wife, with her developing political career, will bring him vicariously a feeling of fulfilment and a sense of connectedness with the changing socio-political reality in South Africa, he forces Vera to become the stronger and dominating partner—a position which she rejects because of her need for a more equal kind of relationship (Vera expresses this frustration in a conversation with her daughter, Annick, when she justifies her decision to live apart from Bennet in the words: "Because I cannot live with someone who can't live without me" and then clarifies her stance by adding: "When someone gives you so much power over himself he makes you a tyrant"[75]). It is not only Vera who comes to the conclusion that such a model of relationship is unsustainable in the long run: towards the end of the novel, Bennet realizes that his life choices (abandoning his artistic ambitions and then likewise a university career) have led him to a state of excessive reliance on his wife, which he despises but does not know how to change.

None to Accompany Me is not the only literary work in which Gordimer describes the entrapments of a devotion that leads to the subjugation of one's goals and ambitions to the needs of the other person—a similar theme can be found in "**The Second Sense**" (*The New Yorker*, 10 December 2006 [as "The First Sense"]; *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 2007), the second part of a triptych in which Gordimer explores male-female relationships in the context of the social, political, and economic changes in post-apartheid South Africa. "The Second Sense" traces the development of a marriage in which the man is a successful cello player, while the woman, once an aspirant musician, has opted for the mundane though stable work in an office. Unable to find fulfilment in her job, she places her ambitions in her husband, eliciting a vicarious sense

75 Nadine Gordimer, *None to Accompany Me* (New York: Picador, 1994), 276.

of satisfaction from his achievements instead of focussing on her own development. The subjugation of her own needs to her husband's career goes so far that when the woman finds out that she is pregnant, she aborts the baby, not even mentioning it to her husband due to her conviction that the news will disturb him in his work. This decision may be seen as an expression of her love for him, but it is also a token of her fear that she is no longer in a position to challenge the balance of power in their relationship by demanding her husband's support. It is as if her feeling of inferiority—implanted by her husband (who makes it clear to her that she is second-rate as a musician)—has pushed her into the precarious position of a benefactress, whose value is measured primarily by the effectiveness of the care and support she gives to her partner. As her husband drifts away from her, devoting most of his time to his career and to an affair with another woman, his wife remains in the passive role of an observer, once again choosing not to confront her husband on this issue: "She did not ask because—she was also afraid that what happened once admitted, it would be irrevocably real."[76] Her silent belief that the language of his music can give her a more complete insight into his feelings can be viewed as an expression of a conviction that the artist's soul is revealed most fully in his chosen medium, but, more importantly, it is also a measure of her insecurity in their relationship, as she cannot find in herself the strength to confront her husband with her suspicions.

It is worthwhile to consider Gordimer's novel *None to Accompany Me* (1994) and her story "The Second Sense" in the context of Susan Pearsall's insightful article on everyday life in Gordimer's novels. Pearsall argues that Gordimer "sets up a traditional dichotomy between the realm of the everyday, alternately described with minute realism and figured metaphorically as a home that the subject unthinkingly inhabits, and the realm of art and political commitment, of transcendent human achievement."[77] The dichotomy described by Pearsall is clearly visible also in Gordimer's stories, in which the everyday is invariably connected with mundane activities of maintaining the economic, social, and political status quo (it is significant that where this rule does not apply—the stories about the political and revolutionary potential

76 Nadine Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 165.

77 Susan Pearsall, "'Where the Banalities are Enacted: The Everyday in Gordimer's Novels," *Research in African Literatures* 31, no. 1 (2000): 102, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3820647.

of everyday life[78]—the households that are not governed by the conservative forces of capitalism are those of black and coloured South Africans). If the realm of artistic and political achievement lies outside of the family home, the same can be said of self-realization, which is connected with committing oneself to a cause that will benefit a larger group of people, not only one's family. In Gordimer's works, a relationship is successful and mutually fulfilling only if the partners share a common purpose—one that is not exclusive to the interests of their union and/or their family—and have proven to themselves and to others that they work meaningfully and successfully to achieve this purpose.

The 2000s: Marriage Crises under the New Dispensation

In her last stories, Gordimer wrote about the various failures of communication in male-female relationships in the context of the social, political, and material conditions of post-apartheid South Africa. Her tendency to explore personal relationships against the wider socio-political background is clearly visible in "The First Sense" and "The Games Room," which share a common theme insofar as they concentrate on the gradual disintegration of relationships in the times of the new dispensation, showing its effect on previously disempowered groups.

"**The First Sense**" (*Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 2007) describes the impact of emigration on the relationship between a Hungarian couple, Ferenc and Zsuzsana, living in post-apartheid South Africa. While Ferenc, a former lecturer in philosophy, fails to adapt to their new reality (not being able to communicate in English, he is given a job in a supermarket), his wife, uneducated but more adaptable than her husband, begins her career by being a dressmaker and then becomes a successful assistant to an estate agent, selling luxurious houses to the new generation of rich South Africans. Her success comes at the expense of her personal life since she has little time to devote to her husband and her son. The cost of wellbeing in the new country is brushed aside with words that give us a direct insight into her thoughts: "You don't have to be

78 Here I mean such stories as "A Chip of Glass Ruby" (*Contrast* (1.1), 1960; *The Atlantic*, February 1961; *Not for Publication*, 1965) and "Some Monday for Sure" (*Transition* (4.18) 1965; *Not for Publication*, 1965), both discussed in Chapter Three, and "A City of the Dead, A City of the Living" (*The New Yorker*, 5 April 1982; *Something Out There*, 1984).

a philosopher to know immigration means accepting the conditions declared if you want to survive."[79] This truth, taken for granted by Zsuzsana, is connected not only with the need to make considerable concessions in her private life but also with the decision to forget about her past—a tendency that is visible in her gradual abandonment of Hungarian in favour of English.

Zsuzsana's attitude to her past is governed by a rapid process of selective forgetting based on the decision to cast off the attachments that hinder her from the attainment of personal success, measured chiefly by financial criteria. She is successful insofar as she has adapted to the capitalist world of white middle-class South Africans, whose approach to the past is primarily that of ignorance and indifference; Gordimer shows that their financial pursuits, necessitating an exclusive focus on the present and the future, have led to their total disregard of the country's traumatic history. The narrator emphasizes that "the latest generation of wealthy whites hunted for tradition that wasn't political, just aesthetic, not to be misinterpreted, in assertive frontage and form, as nostalgia for lost white racist supremacy."[80] The clear authorial irony in this passage points to a continuity between the country's past and its present, suggesting that the egoistic and mercenary attitude of white, affluent South Africans is, to some extent, a continuation of the colonial project started by their ancestors. Gordimer shows that the wealthy South Africans have created for themselves the illusion of living in an ahistorical present, in separation from the past and mindful of the future only insofar as it is considered in terms of their and their family's financial wellbeing.

The realities of post-apartheid consumer culture are clearly visible also in "**The Games Room**" (*The American Scholar*, Spring 2011), in which Gordimer explores the effects of political and economic transformation on the people who once belonged to an underprivileged social group. "The Games Room" concentrates on the life of a coloured couple, Wally and Delphine Abrahams, who are successful in procuring for themselves a comfortable middle-class existence in post-apartheid South Africa. As part of the policy of empowerment, Wally Abrahams is given a loan, which enables him to start a building business, and, in this way, join the dynamically evolving South African middle class. As his business takes off, Wally decides to build a house for his young and attractive wife. The house is not a big one, since the two are not planning to expand

79 Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 146.

80 Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 145.

their family (Wally has sons from his previous marriage, while Delphine does not want any children because the costs of their upbringing would lower their standard of living). The narrator makes it clear that the move into the house is not only a step up the social ladder but also an event that changes their self-perception and redefines the sense of who they are: "To move into a house for the first time is to be owned by it, as it is to be its owner."[81]

As Delphine is offered a job in a communications company, she begins to associate with people who—like her—have social aspirations. One day, queuing in a bank, she sees an advertisement which inspires her to redesign their house by adding to it the titular "games room"—a large, open-spaced room built on top of their house and connected to it only via a ladder. The games room, which soon becomes a major attraction for their friends, is symbolic of their social aspirations, which have grown beyond their initial ambitions of having a house of their own. In the case of Delphine, the room is also a site for the evolving cult of the body (she asks her husband to install a gym and spends much of her time there). It is in the games room that Wally, returning from his job late in the night, discovers her with her lover. Finally, the room is where their shared dream of a better life comes to a tragic end, as it is where Wally commits suicide by hanging.

Clearly present in Gordimer's story is the tone of dry irony aimed at both protagonists, who define themselves mostly in relation to the goods they possess. In this relationship, it is Delphine who takes the initiative and it is she who dictates what they have to do in order to progress on their way to a better life. While it is true that Wally's goal is to do his wife's bidding with no questions asked (for example, to pay for her ambitions, he accepts appointments that keep him out of the home for extended periods of time, which is one reason why their marriage breaks apart), it would be an exaggeration to view him merely as a victim of his wife's social ambitions: he, too, is strongly drawn to a life of prosperity, perhaps because he fears that without proving himself financially, he will risk being abandoned by his materialistic wife. If this is the case, then the tragic end of the story is also a bitterly ironic one.

81 Nadine Gordimer, "The Games Room," *The American Scholar* 80, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 98, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41222375.

Conclusion: Criticising the Culture of Entitlement

As I maintain in this book, the central notion in Gordimer's fiction as "an enactment of life"[82] is that of truth, which lies in the complexity of human motivations and in the dynamics of human interactions. The goal of the writer, Gordimer believed, is to pursue this fragmentary, dynamic, and elusive truth about human beings, and, in doing so, both to reflect life and to be engaged in it. As she pointed out in "Turning the Page: African Writers and the Twenty-First Century," a lecture delivered at a UNESCO Symposium in 1992, if literature is to be truly engaged with life, it cannot eliminate "the beauty of language, the complexity of human emotions; on the contrary, such literature must be able to use all these in order to be truly engaged with life."[83] It is important to add that Gordimer did not oppose politics to life; on the contrary, beginning with the 1960s, she saw politics as an important force acting on life in the sense of shaping human motivations and actions. She believed that to reflect life, the writer has to remain alert to the political (and non-political) stance of the people described.

Staying with the topic of politics, it can be argued that the most important question for Gordimer concerned the extent to which white South Africans were ready to embrace the social and political changes taking place in their country by participating in them. This stemmed from her growing realization that the democratic transformation (the end of apartheid, which she anticipated both in her fiction and non-fiction) demanded of those citizens a complete redefinition of their identity and of their place in the country. Gordimer often focused her attention on what stood in the way of this reinvention: what she called in her essay "What Being a South African Means to Me" (1977), "the lingering sloth of privilege"[84] among white people and the resulting stance of political quietism.

Gordimer's concern with whether white South Africans could respond adequately to the changing socio-political situation in their country had an unquestionable influence on her works, including the stories analysed in this chapter. The other major factor that shaped her thinking about social interactions—specifically male-female relationships—was her strong critique of

82 Gordimer, *Writing and Being*, 18.

83 Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History*, 31.

84 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 280.

the patriarchal system, with its tradition of women's dependence on men. As I observed at the beginning of the chapter, while Gordimer was dismissive of feminism (especially of its relevance in South Africa), her writing raises several issues also discussed by mainstream and radical feminists. It is worthwhile to mention De Beauvoir's comment on "a tradition of submissiveness"[85] among women and Kate Millett's characterization of women as "a dependency class,"[86] whose political conservatism—indeed, reactionism—is shaped by their allegiance to the capitalist and patriarchal order.

My suggestion is to treat the submissiveness of Gordimer's female characters as an expression of her deep pessimism regarding the social and political awareness among middle-class women. It seems that she saw the culture of entitlement among white South Africans—both women and men—as an effective obstacle to social change (it is significant that the majority of her white characters, despite their frustrations and private rebellions, almost invariably choose material comfort and the comfort of social acceptance). Viewed from a wider perspective, the failure of Gordimer's female protagonists to effect change in their lives can be treated as proof of the power of ideology working on individual consciousness, effectively subverting dissent into delusion—the desire for a new balance of power into the false but strong hope that there is refuge to be found in a social system that promotes gender inequality.

Gordimer's nuanced exploration of "the way human beings use power in their relationships"[87] will also be discussed in Chapter Six, concentrating on relationships between parents and children. Of special interest will be how children are shaped, both emotionally and intellectually, by their immediate surroundings and how they respond to their parents'—often overwhelming—influence.

85 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 814.

86 Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 38.

87 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 259.

Chapter Six

"The Way Human Beings Use Power in Their Relationships": Relationships between Parents and Children

Inspired by the "Amazing Wilderness" of Human Motivations

In her article "The Dwelling Place of Words" (2001), Nadine Gordimer offers the following definition of writing: "For me, writing has been and is an exploration of life, the safari that will go on into that amazing wilderness until I die. That is why my novels and stories are what I call open-ended; I've taken up an invention of human beings at some point in their lives, and set them down again living at some other point."[1] In Gordimer's understanding, since life is shaped by dynamic, unpredictable, and nuanced human motivations, only the open-ended structure of literary works—one that does not lay any claims to closure—can convey its true nature. It is worthwhile to add that this reflection, formulated at a late stage in her literary career, is consistent with her earlier views on writing, for example with her essay "The Short Story in South Africa" (1968), in which she argues that short story writers, unlike novelists, are not bound by the principles of coherence and continuity but rather seek to convey the complexity of human life at a given point in time.

Gordimer's fascination with life, clearly stated in "The Dwelling Place of Words" (2001), was the driving force in her journeys through the "amazing wilderness" of human motivations. Gordimer was interested in the intricate forces that bind people together into social units—including the family—and the dynamic that governs these groups. It is in the interaction between characters that she looked for the experiential truth about human beings, which remained the ultimate goal of all her works. As I emphasize throughout this book, this truth has a political dimension since for Gordimer pursuing the truth about

1 Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times, 1954–2008* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 591.

life in her country entailed writing about the political forces that governed it. This statement will apply also to the stories discussed in this chapter, which will look at parent-child relations against the background of the social and political situation in South Africa.

Writing about parent-child stories is a task that involves studying a large number of works: over thirty of them are devoted to this topic, not counting those in which it is present in the background. Gordimer wrote about relationships of mutual dependence in many stages of their development: from the tender ages of early childhood, when (not necessarily positive) parental influence is unconsciously absorbed,[2] through adolescence and early adulthood,[3] when the parents' values and beliefs are scrutinized by their children, to maturity, which in many stories by Gordimer is a time when grown-up children are made acutely aware of the impact of their parents on their lives, often challenging it in their actions.[4] While most stories concentrate on relationships between mothers and daughters, there are some notable exceptions, including "Letter from His Father" (*London Review of Books*, 20 October–2 November 1983; *Something Out There*, 1984) and "A Journey" (*The Irish Times*, 8 July 1989; *Jump*, 1991), both of which study the dynamics of father-son relationships.

A revealing comment on the nature of parent-child interactions can be found in an interview Gordimer gave in 1986, also mentioned in Chapter Five, in which she argued that one of the "central themes" in her short stories was "the way human beings use power in their relationships."[5] Another, more specific common feature of parent-child stories is that most of them focus on white, middle-class families. Important exceptions here are "A Chip of Glass Ruby" (*Contrast* (1.1), 1960; *The Atlantic*, February 1961; *Not for Publication*, 1965),

2 "Little Willie" (*The New Yorker*, 30 March 1957; *Friday's Footprint*, 1960), "The Path of the Moon's Dark Fortnight" (*Mademoiselle*, October 1958; *Friday's Footprint*, 1960), "Tenants of the Last Tree-House" (*The New Yorker*, 15 December 1962; *Not for Publication*, 1965), and "A Satisfactory Settlement" (*The Atlantic*, January 1969; *Livingstone's Companions*, 1971).

3 "The Umbilical Cord" (*Trek* (12.11), 1948; *Face to Face*, 1949) and "Charmed Lives" (*Harper's Bazaar*, February 1956; *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956).

4 "The Bride of Christ" (*The Atlantic*, August 1967; *Livingstone's Companions*, 1971), "The Credibility Gap" (*Livingstone's Companions*, 1971), "The Generation Gap" (*Loot*, 2003), "L,U,C,I,E." (*Granta*, 30 September 1993; *Loot*, 2003), and "A Beneficiary" (*The New Yorker*, 14 May 2007; *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 2007).

5 Nancy Topping Bazin and Marilyn Dallman Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 259.

"Some Monday for Sure" (*Transition* (4.18) 1965; *Not for Publication*, 1965), and "A City of the Dead, A City of the Living" (*The New Yorker*, 5 April 1982; *Something Out There*, 1984),[6] whose subject is the effects of apartheid on black and coloured families in the context of their political commitment. Two stories discussed in this chapter, "Little Willie" (*The New Yorker*, 30 March 1957; *Friday's Footprint*, 1960) and "A Satisfactory Settlement" (*The Atlantic*, January 1969; *Livingstone's Companions*, 1971), address the influence of apartheid on white families by showing how racist and chauvinist attitudes are passed down from parents to children.

Leaving the Mother's House

To shed more light on parent-child relationships in Gordimer's stories, the issue of personal autonomy should be considered against the background of her attitude to the family home. A revealing comment on this topic can be found in an interview conducted by John Barkham for *Saturday Review* in 1963, in which Gordimer compared the birth of political consciousness to cutting ties with her racial and social origins: "First, you know, you leave your mother's house, and later you leave the house of the white race."[7] This reflection is accurate insofar as her works, including her short stories, can indeed be characterized by the stronger and more uncompromising critique of the white bourgeois family, which increasingly often becomes an obstacle to the freedom and creativity of the individual, and, more generally, to social and political change. That this tendency is inherent in her stories was mentioned in Chapter Two, in the discussion of cross-racial relationships in "Ah, Woe is Me" (*Common Sense*, (8.9), 1947; *Face to Face*, 1949), "The Pet" (*The New Yorker*, 24 March 1962; *Not for Publication* (1965), and "Blinder" (*The Boston Globe Magazine*, 24 July 1983; *Something Out There* (1984). Those three stories show Gordimer "leav[ing] the house of the white race"[8] in her critique of this house and what it represents.

The topic of child-parent relationships in Gordimer's novels was explored by John Cooke, who in his study *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes* (1985) observes that one of her central concerns is "the continuing

6 Because of their focus on political commitment, those stories were discussed in Chapter Three.

7 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 9.

8 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 9.

'emotional force of the child-parent relationship.'"[9] The first three novels, Cooke points out, can be seen as "a record of progressively greater liberation—and finally freedom—from the mother's confining world."[10] Cooke demonstrates a change in Gordimer's novels from those whose protagonists unsuccessfully try to leave the house of the white family to later ones (by which Cooke means the novels published after *A Guest of Honour* (1971)), in which we can witness "the gradual loss of importance, and finally the eradication, of the white house in which the mother's power was supreme."[11] Quoting Gordimer's comment on "leav[ing] your mother's house" and "the house of the white race," Cooke observes that in her later novels (here he is referring specifically to *Burger's Daughter* (1979) and *July's People* (1981)), "these two leave takings are one."[12]

To explain Gordimer's approach to the topic of the white family, I would also like to refer to Rita Barnard's study *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (2007). In Chapter Two of her book, Barnard argues that the white house in Gordimer's fiction[13] is "the quintessential colonial space; the most intimate of South Africa's many ideological enclosures."[14] Barnard notes that the house in Gordimer's stories can be understood as "the spatial expression of a certain wishful and often deceptive fiction about the world."[15] Despite the fact that Barnard is being—inevitably—selective in her discussion of Gordimer's fiction, the three stories that she chooses for her discussion ("The Life of the Imagination" (*Livingstone's Companions*, 1971), "The Termitary" (*A Soldier's Embrace*, 1980), and "Once Upon a Time (*Jump*, 1991)) show that when considering Gordimer's short fiction, we cannot adopt uncritically Cooke's observation and talk about "the eradication, of the white house."[16]

9 John Cooke, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1985), 19.

10 Cooke, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 19.

11 Cooke, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 46.

12 Cooke, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 47.

13 Barnard is referring to a category of Gordimer's prose which she calls "semiautobiographical fiction," defined as "texts with a female narrator or protagonist who either shares some of Gordimer's childhood experiences or who is explicitly identified as an author." Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 44.

14 Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 48.

15 Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 53.

16 Cooke, *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer*, 46.

While Gordimer's critique of insular middle-class families intensified from the late 1960s, it is also true the white house did not disappear from her works; indeed, the majority of her stories about family relationships are set in this social milieu. What we can certainly observe is an ever-stronger criticism of the conservatism and political passivity of white South Africans.

The 1950s: Close Dependencies in Child-Parent Stories

Gordimer's child protagonists are driven by two impulses: a powerful need for physical and emotional closeness on the one hand (together with the need to win or maintain their parents' approval), and—on the other—confusion and guilt resulting from their failure to grasp the complexity of their relationships with their parents. This comment is especially resonant in the context of two early stories to be discussed in this subchapter, "An Island of Rock" and "My First Two Women," where an unclear domestic situation raises questions of allegiance and belonging, which shape—often in unconscious ways—the child-parent dynamics.

In "**An Island of Rock**," a story accepted by *The New Yorker* in 1953 but ultimately unpublished,[17] the child-parent relationship plays itself out between the child's powerful need for a sense of safety that she expects from her father and his failure to empathize with his daughter. The story is focalized by a girl of around five or six named Daphne, whose parents have recently gone through a divorce. Daphne spends her weekdays under the care of her mother and the weekends in the company of her father, Stephen. The story concentrates on one Sunday when Daphne is picked up by Stephen and taken to his home, where she meets—for the first time—his partner and her two children, a boy and a girl. The adults take little notice of their children: they either tolerate their presence, or—when they interact with them—do so in a spirit of light-hearted mockery. This insensitivity is strongly felt in the relationship between Stephen and Daphne: as the girl clings to her father, treating him as the only stable point in her life of constant insecurity ("an island of rock against which everything washed"[18]), the man discusses her openly with his friends, taking little notice

17 Gordimer withdrew the story eventually because of its similarities with her own family situation.

18 Nadine Gordimer, "An Island of Rock." Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

of the fact that his behaviour has the effect of unsettling his daughter. The image of Daphne embracing her father in a futile attempt to gain his attention conveys the bitter irony of the story, which is that even in the safety of physical closeness, the girl cannot find the reassurance she is seeking, since her life is dependent on social contracts that she fails to understand.

While "An Island of Rock" examines Daphne's attempts to make sense of the intricacies of the adult world, a closer reading of the story shows Gordimer subtly reversing this logic to suggest that the story is not so much about knowing but about *being known.* This is connected with how Daphne reacts to the house where she lived until her parents' divorce and, more importantly, how she responds to the portrait of her mother, which still hangs in the hallway. The portrait is mentioned at the end of the story, when Daphne, trying to gain the attention of the adults, points to it and says that her eyes are exactly like those of her absent mother's. As the striking similarity between the mother and the daughter captivates the adults, leading to a moment of uncomfortable silence, Daphne is suddenly overcome with the feeling that she has earned her mother's scorn by having committed a grave error, though what it is she is unable to grasp. The misguidedness of the child's logic, which attributes rejection to an unspecified guilt, emphasizes Daphne's inability to understand the reason for her mother's absence and points indirectly to her father's failure to explain the difficult family situation.

In a similar way to "An Island of Rock," "**My First Two Women**" (*The New Yorker*, 24 March 1956 [as "The Pretender"]; *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956) describes the child-parent dynamic in the wake of the parents' separation. The story is narrated by a mature man of uncertain age, later in the story identified as Nick, who looks back upon his childhood, specifically the relationship between himself and his stepmother, Deb. Nick's childhood is described as peaceful and happy, but—as we learn—it is not free of doubts and quandaries. Since the boy spends most of his days with his father and his stepmother, visiting his biological mother only occasionally, his relationship with Deb is one of the most important to be forged in Nick's childhood, becoming formative in the wider story of his life. As he strengthens his bond with Deb, Nick begins to feel a conflict between his need for safety and comfort, provided by his nurturing stepmother, and a vague but powerful sense of guilt stemming from the intuition that the emotional closeness with his stepmother is a transgression against his biological mother. Torn between seeking to satisfy his emotional

needs on the one hand and his guilt on the other, the boy tries to gain a sense of control over his emotions by using his power over his stepmother to dictate the terms of their interaction. It is only in his adolescence that he learns about the context of their relationship: the fact that his biological mother relinquished the right to adopt him, leaving him in the care of Nick's father and Deb. As Deb breaks this news to Nick, the boy reacts with puzzlement and then displaced resentment directed at her.

"My First Two Women" has perhaps the most interesting publication history of all Gordimer's stories. After completing it at the beginning of 1955, Gordimer sent it to Katharine White, the first of her *New Yorker* editors. On 17 March 1955, Gordimer received a telegram from White in which she expressed her appreciation of the story but criticised the decision to choose a male narrator. White's suggestion was to change the narrator's gender so as to make the psychological insights in the story more convincing (White's opinion being that male narrators are ill-chosen when it comes to describing the nuances of human relationships). Gordimer responded with a letter in which she argued that the choice of a male narrator—"an apparently awkward switch"[19]—was dictated primarily by the fact that a female narrator would make the story resemble too closely her own and her husband's life situation: as Ronald Suresh Roberts points out, "she changed the sex of the child narrator from female to male, in order to discourage suggestions that the story was 'about' Reinhold's daughter [from his first marriage], Pippa."[20] Nevertheless, after consulting her husband, Gordimer rewrote the story from a female perspective and sent it first to her lawyers to ascertain whether the story could be considered libellous, and then re-submitted it to *The New Yorker* under the changed title "Crown or Thorn." Ultimately, the phrase "crown or thorn," taken from a passage in the original version, was rejected, and the story was published in *The New Yorker* a year later, on March 24, 1956, under the title "The Pretender"—a neat reference to its ending.[21]

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19 Nadine Gordimer to Katharine White, 19 March 1955. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

20 Ronald Suresh Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen: A Biography of Nadine Gordimer* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2005), 119.

21 After he realizes that Deb never had any ambition of becoming his mother, satisfying herself with the role of his stepmother and friend, the narrator notes: "My stepmother sat in her own private peace, like a pretender to the throne who has abdicated his right of accession." Nadine Gordimer, "The Pretender," *New Yorker*, March 24, 1956, 38.

Juxtaposing "The Pretender" with its original version, published as "My First Two Women" in *Six Feet of the Country*, it becomes clear that the change of the narrator's gender has produced two different stories. The first thing lost in "The Pretender" is the ironical reference in the title, suggesting that the narrator's relationship with his stepmother was an initiation into the relationships between men and women. The narrator's male gender also allows for playful references, for example, when, aware of his power over Deb, Nick describes her as "kneeling" before him, ironically putting himself in the role of a king, with Deb as his subject (*The New Yorker* version uses the verb "squat"). While this is only a passing reference, Nick is keen to emphasize his power over Deb throughout the story in other unusual juxtapositions, as is the case when he compares their friendship during his adolescence to the relationship between a man and a lover in whom he has lost interest: "Her position must have been curiously like that of the woman who, failing to secure as a lover the man with whom she has fallen in love, is offered instead his respect and his confidences."[22] Once again, this time without irony, the narrator presents himself as the one who has absolute power over the terms of their relationship: it is he who is in the position of a giver, while the woman has no choice but to be content with whatever is bestowed upon her at any given moment. The differences between the two versions of the stories are also visible in the following two passages, in which the narrator looks back upon the conflicting emotions of love and guilt:

"The Pretender"	**"My First Two Women"**
I think there must have been something strongly attractive to me in the ease of this **family intimacy, which had not existed in our old home, and** to which my father and I found ourselves admitted with such naturalness. Yet because it was unfamiliar, the very seductiveness of its comfort seemed, against the confusion of my short life,	I think there must have been something strongly attractive to me in the ease of this **feminine intimacy** to which my father and I found ourselves admitted with such naturalness. Yet because it was unfamiliar, the very seductiveness of its comfort seemed, against the confusion of my short life, a kind of disloyalty, to which I was party and of

22 Nadine Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country: Fifteen Short Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 112.

> a kind of disloyalty, to which I was party and of which I, **too,** was guilty.[23]

> which I was guilty. **Disloyalty – to what? Guilty – of what?**[24]

Looking at the juxtaposition of the two passages quoted above, it is worthwhile to note that the questions posed by the narrator in the passage taken from "My First Two Women" are missing in "The Pretender." This significant omission points to a more general tendency in the editing of Gordimer's stories for *The New Yorker*, which is that of minimising questions and doubts in the narrative. It seems that the editor was looking for a confident narrative voice that does not leave too many gaps and silences—least of all those that cannot be filled after the first reading of the story. There are other examples of the editor's inclination to guide the reader more firmly through the story by closing such small silences.[25] Other edits in "The Pretender" include the removal of some of Gordimer's more flowery comparisons,[26] most of which convey the narrator's state of mind but have the disadvantage of slowing down the pace of the story.

The 1950s and the 1960s: Ideological Conditioning in Families

Gordimer's stories show that through the authority of the parents, the family has the power to create and perpetuate in children certain class- and race-related

23 Gordimer, "The Pretender," 36 (my emphasis).

24 Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country*, 108 (my emphasis).

25 To give one of two possible examples here, the following passage shows what has been added to "The Pretender" in order to elucidate Deb's comment on her own and her husband's decision not to tell Nick that his mother relinquished her right to take care of him: "We made up our minds. We decided it was best. We decided we would try and make your relationship with her as normal as possible. Never say anything against her. I promised myself I wouldn't try—wouldn't try to make things better for myself." Gordimer, "The Pretender," 38. The underlined phrase was added to *The New Yorker* edition of the story; in "My First Two Women" we read: "I promised myself I wouldn't try—for myself." Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country*, 113.

26 The following passage concentrates on Deb's reaction to Nick's decision to call her 'mother': "I looked up into the stare of her eyes—grown-up eyes that fell before ~~mine—and in me, like milk soured by a flash of lightning, the sweet secretion of affection became insipid in the~~ [and felt the] fearful, amazed thrill of victim turned victor." Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country*, 109. The crossed-out fragment was left out in "The Pretender."

stereotypes. Even families which are not overtly racist or chauvinist instil in children certain social behaviours (such as the attitude towards other social classes, as well as decisions dictated by what one considers to be desirable life goals, like the choice of a partner or profession) as a norm against which other actions and worldviews are judged. One story which has at its centre the moment when a child's vision of the world is irrevocably changed by the behaviour of adults is "**Little Willie**" (*The New Yorker*, 30 March 1957; *Friday's Footprint*, 1960). "Little Willie" is—in Gordimer's words—"a brief ironical tale of a small girl corrupted by her involvement in a piece of apparently innocent make-believe concocted by grownups for their own amusement."[27] The eponymous little Willie, a poor African boy, is a character invented by the playful and ironic uncle of an eight-year-old girl, Denise, most probably to tease the child and to test how she reacts to the presence of the imagined companion. Denise is at first cautious about her uncle's story but nonetheless flattered by Willie's apparent admiration. It is the uncle's claim that little Willie knows her—that is, knows details about her life—that makes Denise awkward and a little uncomfortable, as if she felt the boy constantly observing her. Trying to get rid of this vague but disturbing presence, Denise rejects Willie, accusing him of breaching the race and class barrier. Although this is an unorthodox move to make in a house in which the racial divide is taken for granted, Denise's mother is made uncomfortable by her daughter's crude expression of petty racism and does not side with her. The discovery of her mother's critical attitude towards her behaviour, which Denise fails to understand, brings about a change of heart in the girl: she turns her embarrassment and shame into scorn and disgust, as if she was trying to cut herself off from an incomprehensible situation: "She despised him. What a cheek he had, a hopeless cheek, to look at *her*."[28]

The focal point of "Little Willie" is its conclusion, in which Denise's uncle gives her a lavish box of chocolates, maintaining that the gift comes from Willie. As Denise unpacks the gift, her mind once again conjures up the image of the non-existent little boy:

> A dirty boy without shoes. She was ashamed of him; nothing could change that. She was still ashamed of him. She despised him. She would

27 Nadine Gordimer to Hilary Rubinstein, 7 April 1959. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

28 Nadine Gordimer, *Friday's Footprint and Other Stories* (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), 64.

> never speak to him or look at him; and he knew this. But the present in her lap was not to be resisted. She had been brought up to accept the system of reward and punishment as an awful justice impossible to circumvent; yet no-one whom she had loved, been kind to, or tried to please had ever rewarded her with something as fine as this. It was magnificent, it was like nothing she had ever been given before, and she had earned it by scorn and disdain. She held the box recklessly tight, and when she peeled the gold paper off the first chocolate and put it in her mouth, the cherry inside was the fruit of knowledge, a sweet stain of danger, on her tongue.[29]

The underlined fragments, which appear in the second version of the original manuscript (titled "New ending for Gordimer's 'Little Willie'"), were added by Gordimer for *The New Yorker* version and further edited by Roger Angell. The addition was prompted by Angell's question about Denise's state of mind at the end of the story. Angell was curious whether, according to Gordimer, Denise comes to the conclusion that the box of chocolates was earned by her consistent derision of the poor boy Willie. Gordimer answered in the affirmative, adding that the grown-up joke may have a far-reaching, corruptive influence on Denise. As Gordimer observed, Denise's realization "may be the beginning of a ruthless attitude."[30]

The parent-child stories discussed so far have one shared characteristic—all of them concentrate on the parents' inability to understand their children on an intellectual and emotional level. This failure of empathy may result from a number of reasons, such as a simple lack of interest and an unwillingness to meaningfully engage with their children's problems and preoccupations (as is the case in "An Island of Rock"), the inability to see the consequences of one's actions (in "Little Willie"), or simply the fact that it is impossible for adults, despite emotional intelligence and goodwill, to fully empathize with children ("My First Two Women"). In some of the stories mentioned here, the adults' failure of empathy is described in the context of wider social criticism: in "An Island of Rock" what underlies the adults' instrumental treatment of children

29 Typescript of "Little Willie" (my emphasis). Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

30 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 30 November 1956. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

is their materialism and superficiality; in "Little Willie," the adults' failure to gauge the effect of their cruel joke is rooted not only in their manifest lack of emotional intelligence but also in their chauvinist attitudes.

In a similar way to "Little Willie," "**A Satisfactory Settlement**" (*The Atlantic*, January 1968; *Livingstone's Companions,* 1971) demonstrates the mechanisms by which young children, seeking their parents' acceptance, absorb their attitudes and values by adopting discriminatory attitudes towards underprivileged social groups. In the story, a boy of around ten meets a group of coloured men squatting in a nearby house and an aged, homeless person, who occasionally visits the neighbourhood, selling bits and pieces of junk that he finds in people's garbage. The boy treats the man with cautious reserve, but he is clearly fascinated by his paraphernalia. One night, as the squatters' presence becomes particularly disruptive, the boy's mother and the next-door neighbours gather on their front lawn to discuss this problem. Seeking the adults' acceptance or simply an acknowledgment of his presence, the boy formulates a comment, which he later builds into an entirely unfounded accusation of the homeless man that he met earlier in the story. At the centre of "A Satisfactory Settlement" is the moment when the atmosphere of racial and social discrimination in which the boy is immersed is suddenly transformed into open and irrational hostility. It is a moment of empowerment, as the boy, borne by the attention and understanding of the adults, builds his prejudice into a deep conviction of being wronged by a person who, in all probability, is entirely innocent.

The 1950s and the 1960s: Children Trying to Emerge from the Shadow of Their Parents

As I observed at the beginning of this chapter, Gordimer's political development can be characterized by her gradual dissociation from her immediate background—"leaving her mother's house," to use her words—and then her rejection of a wider racial and social group—"leaving the house of the white race." The realization that the decision to leave the family home constitutes the necessary first step both to personal and political self-realization is present already in Gordimer's early prose. In *The Lying Days* (1953), the political awakening of the main protagonist, Helen Shaw, is a gradual process which takes place against the background of her growing estrangement from her family, most importantly from her mother. As Helen adopts the liberal values of her

university friends, she distances herself from her parents, believing that it is possible to find common ground in an honest exchange of views with them. In the course of time, however, Helen finds herself overcome by the awareness of an unbridgeable gap between her and her parents. It is not this feeling, however, which she finds unsettling but rather the tension between her need for acceptance and the desire for self-assertion: "The simultaneous experience of longing for warmth and closeness and a wild kicking irritation to be free."[31] Helen's sense of unease at this situation is transformed into a powerful aversion to "narrow, stifling conventional life"[32] after her parents turn down the request to help her friend Mary Seswayo by accommodating her for a couple of weeks in their house. This crisis leads to Helen's decision to move out of her family home and take financial responsibility for her life. The process of estrangement is complete with the mother's realization that her daughter is in a socially unsanctioned relationship with a man: it is as if Helen's sexual emancipation was the final proof of her political self-assertion.

The strong desire to leave the family house, which—it should be added—is not Helen's final stance,[33] makes itself clearly felt in Gordimer's stories, whose characters often wish to escape from their surroundings and to do so at any price. One example of such a story is "**Charmed Lives**" (*Harper's Bazaar*, February 1956; *Six Feet of the Country*, 1956). Its main protagonist, a young woman called Kate Shand, is critical of her parents—indeed, she even anticipates a time when she will sever the connection with them—but she has not yet reached this desired goal. Kate grows up in a stifling atmosphere of a provincial town, which is home to a community defined chiefly by insularity and conservatism. The mother is the embodiment of this identity, built on the Victorian idea of domestic propriety. Kate's family, in which her mother asserts her superiority with respect to her husband by displaying passive-aggressive behaviour, while her father redirects his feeling of frustration by denigrating his social inferiors (his employees and black South Africans), becomes a microcosm of the chauvinist and racist South African society of the 1950s. To distance herself from this dysfunctional power dynamic and forge equal, reciprocal relationships

31 Nadine Gordimer, *The Lying Days* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), 183.

32 Gordimer, *The Lying Days*, 196.

33 Towards the end of the novel, Helen reaches the conclusion that one's origins should never be flatly rejected, since such a rejection would constitute the self-contradictory gesture of repressing an important part of her identity.

become Kate's main objectives as she grows up, goes to university, and, ultimately, decides to leave her home town.

The most interesting part of "Charmed Lives" is the passage in which Kate motivates her decision to start a new life in the city. As we learn at the end of the story, this decision is not the result of rational reasoning but of strong emotions—"a kind of panic"[34] that Kate feels when thinking about the town and its inhabitants. In contrast to *The Lying Days*, the desire to dissociate herself from her family home is not qualified by the imperative to acknowledge and work through the pervasive influence of her mother. It is worthwhile to add that in arriving at her decision to leave the family house, Kate is not motivated by political reasons, or rather if those reasons are political, they are not outspokenly so. Certainly, the stories published in the 1950s have fewer political references than the ones that Gordimer wrote a decade later, when she rejected the liberal stance and adopted a different conception of the short story, which does not draw a clear distinction between the personal and the political.

While in the 1960s Gordimer intensified her critique of the conservative values that shape white middle-class families, she never quite left "her mother's house" insofar as she continued to write about mother-daughter relationships. In "**Harry's Presence**" (*Friday's Footprint*, 1960), published four years after "Charmed Lives," the narrator's mother is an overbearing figure whose domination in the house remains uncontested. The story concentrates on the subtle ways in which the arrival of a distant cousin, Harry, affects the relationships between family members, ultimately leading to a serious conflict. In the background of the story is the unequal wife-husband relationship, in which the wife, a South African by birth, does not hide her denigration of her husband's Greek family. The husband is, like Mr. Shand in "Charmed Lives," totally passive and it is given to understand that his passivity, understood primarily as his tendency to withdraw from family life, is largely the effect of being constantly disparaged by his wife. Faced with the man's stance of helplessness and calm resignation, Harry takes over the duties of maintaining the household (e.g., repairing things around the house), thus assuming the authority associated with the role of husband and father. A trivial episode leads to a confrontation in which the man assaults first the narrator's sister, Edith, and then his wife. The physical violence of the otherwise placid man is shown as a reaction to his complete loss of authority; it is, in a sense, a last-ditch attempt to show his

34 Gordimer, *Friday's Footprint*, 182.

superiority as husband, father, and breadwinner. By concentrating on violence as a desperate attempt to reinstate the male-centred order, Gordimer shows that aggression underlies the patriarchal model of the family.

Both "Charmed Lives" and "Harry's Presence" show Gordimer's interest in children who have not freed themselves entirely from their parents' influence but who have developed strategies that allow them at least a semblance of autonomy. What is especially interesting in "Harry's Presence" is the daughter's approach towards her mother, which, although never discussed openly in the story, can be seen through the intricate ways in which the daughter weaves her mother's perspective into her narrative. An example of this can be found on the second page of the story, where the narrator, having just discussed her mother's negative attitude towards her husband's Greek family, introduces Harry, her distant cousin on her mother's side:

> Harry is a boy of twenty-one who never had any sort of chance—I am quoting my mother all along, now. Uncle Eddie, his father and my mother's uncle, is just too decent a man to make good in business, and what with that fool Emmie for a wife, he hasn't been able to do anything for the boy. As a kid of sixteen Harry had to leave school and work in a sweet factory. He's been pushed from pillar to post all his life. She (my mother) thought it was about time somebody tried to do something for him.[35]

It seems that what we are dealing with in this passage is the narrative equivalent of the act of mimicking her mother by enacting her characteristic way of speaking and—with it—the bourgeois values of thinly-veiled moral self-righteousness and domestic propriety. The mother's attachment to these values becomes even more pronounced at the end of the story, when, confronted with her husband's angry outburst, she pleads with her daughter not to look at the scene of domestic violence, as if only seeing could confirm its reality. Imitating her mother's words and her behaviour at the time, the daughter concludes her narrative with the words: "How idiotic. I'd seen. I'd seen, of course. I've seen everything. There's nothing left to hide from me."[36] Underlying these words is the daughter's refusal to respect the hypocritical premise of her mother's plea

35 Gordimer, *Friday's Footprint*, 179–180.

36 Gordimer, *Friday's Footprint*, 191.

(the problem starts to exist only when it is visible to others) and her resolve to bring the problem out into the open by describing it in her narrative.

Gordimer's interest in parent-children relationships also involved the ways in which sexuality in adolescent women is shaped in their interactions with parents and peers. "**Tenants of the Last Tree-House**" (*The New Yorker*, 15 December 1962; *Not for Publication*, 1965), which belongs to this group, can be described as an initiation story in that it shows the female protagonist's confrontation with the mores of her social class. The story describes the first attempts of the protagonist—a thirteen-year-old girl called Cavada—to deal with the tension between her own suppressed feelings on the one hand, and, on the other, the awareness of what is appropriate and acceptable in a given social context. Gordimer uses irony to emphasize the contrast between what Cavada is made to understand about sexuality and what she experiences directly in her encounters with her peers.

"Tenants of the Last Tree-House" is, on the surface, about the awkward relationship between Cavada and a group of boys, especially Peter, in whom she takes a romantic interest. The dual focus of the story is on Cavada's growing infatuation with Peter (her neighbour and the owner of the eponymous tree-house) and on an adolescent fascination with the transgressiveness of sex. The clash between the two perspectives is best conveyed in a passage describing Cavada's confession of affection for Peter and its vulgar subversion: "On the leaves of a group of giant aloes . . . someone had carved hearts with the legend: *C loves P.* Some of these had been scored across and between them was scratched: *P fucks C. Go to hell. So what!!!*"[37] If the story is about "the mixture of tenderness and obscenity of adolescence,"[38] as Gordimer once commented, it is also quite clear that the obscenity does not end with words; as Cavada and her girlfriends are drawn by the boys into an erotic game, Cavada is ultimately undressed and exposed to the boy's gaze: "Her little girl's body, in all its shameful lack of breasts, stood bared as if in the doctor's waiting room."[39] The objectification of the female body is depicted in the story, similarly to the

37 Nadine Gordimer, *Not for Publication and Other Stories* (New York: The Viking Press, 1965), 152. At Roger Angell's request, Gordimer deleted this vulgar expression from *The New Yorker* edition of the story.

38 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 29 January, 1962. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

39 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, 158.

egoism and exploitative nature of the male sexual drive, as yet unbridled by the middle-class mores represented by Cavada's parents and other suburbanites.

As summer ends and Cavada is sent to school, she tells her peers about her and the other girls' encounters with the boys, doing so in the only language that is available to her: the coarse and, at times, vulgar discourse on sex used by her peers. Reported to her parents by a shocked headmistress, she is then confronted with their thinly-veiled impatience. Her parents' failure to engage in meaningful dialogue with their daughter—they only address the topic of sex from a position of authority—raises in her feelings of shame and guilt. In effect, Cavada begins to view sex as socially transgressive, present yet unmentionable. The confluence of abusive treatment and the inability to address it in any meaningful way leaves Cavada with a difficult combination of genuine affection for Peter and suppressed feelings of guilt and shame, which relate to how she was treated by the group of boys—including Peter—and then, how she was made to speak about this by her parents.

In "Tenants of the Last Tree-House," Gordimer hints at the connection between chauvinism and sexism. To see this connection it is worthwhile to look closer at the names of characters, especially the name of the main protagonist, Cavada Kinschotter. In a letter to Roger Angell, Gordimer commented that Cavada's surname is "an indication of a mixed background,"[40] suggesting that her family has a lower social standing in the middle-class South African suburban community. Gordimer suggests that Cavada's social background will, in the future, separate her from her childhood friends (including her childhood sweetheart, Peter), leaving only a vague memory of the shameful encounter:

> Peter is whatsisname—the ordinary person who will produce a twist, a profound complication in the life of a more complex person and then pass into the unremarkable life of the crowd. Cavada will never know people like him when she is grown up; even their names separate them for the future.[41]

40 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 29 January, 1962. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

41 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 29 January, 1962. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

Gordimer's insight puts the sexual behaviour of Peter and the other boys into the wider context of social class. While Gordimer stops short of making a clear connection between sexual exploitation and class chauvinism, it is not an exaggeration to argue that she is anticipating a not-unlikely future in which the abusive attitude of the male characters will be strengthened by a feeling of social and racial superiority.

The Late 1970s and the 1980s: Exploring Father-Son Relationships

In contrast to the dominating figure of the mother, the father is mostly a background presence in Gordimer's earlier stories. It is in the late 1970s that the figure of the father in Gordimer's prose becomes more central. In *Burger's Daughter* (1979), the influence of the father as an anti-apartheid hero is nothing short of overwhelming. While his daughter, Rosa Burger, first rebels[42] against her father's legacy by choosing the life of an exile in France, she ultimately makes the decision to come back to South Africa. After her return home, she begins to see Burger as an inspiration in her social and political commitment. Writing in the wake of the Soweto Revolt, she compares Burger to the black students protesting against apartheid: "You were a bit like the black children—you had the elation."[43] It is both the elation—the energy with the courage—and the ethics of care that Rosa adopts from her father's work, accepting the consequences that follow: her imprisonment.

The father-child relationship is a central topic in Gordimer's tenth novel, *My Son's Story* (1990), which explores the son's political and artistic development in the context of his strong and ambivalent emotions towards the father. Will, the son of an anti-apartheid activist, has no doubts that the love and hate he feels towards his father have inevitably shaped him and will continue to do so in years to come, as he devotes himself to the artistic and political task of being a writer. In choosing this path, he both accepts the future anticipated for him by his father and asserts control over his life. As John Cooke writes in his article on families in Gordimer's novels, "Will (named after Shakespeare)

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42 Rosa's decision to leave her country for France is rightly seen by Judie Newman as "a belated revolt against the ideology of the parental generation." Judie Newman, *Nadine Gordimer* (London: Routledge, 1988), 75.

43 Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (London: Penguin Books, 1980), 349.

does become what his father wanted him to be, a writer, but in doing so he establishes his own view of the world, the view given in the novel."[44]

In *My Son's Story*, writing is a way of manifesting one's freedom—a process that involves distancing oneself from the values and beliefs held by one's parents. Gordimer's interest in the process of writing as a means of pursuing autonomy and self-realization is also visible in "**Letter from His Father**" (*London Review of Books*, 20 October–2 November 1983; *Something Out There*, 1984), which she first published seven years before *My Son's Story*. Discussed at some length in Chapter Four, "Letter from His Father" is both Gordimer's reflection on Franz Kafka's Jewishness, including his approach to writing, and—more importantly in the context of this chapter—a close psychological study of the claustrophobic relationship between Franz Kafka and his father, Hermann.

Commenting on what inspired her to write "Letter from His Father," Gordimer observed that she wrote the story out of pity for the "poor gross Hermann,"[45] whose lack of education and refinement, as well as his various flaws, has been exposed in Kafka's "Brief an den Vater." Andrew Vogel Ettin makes the valid point that in "Letter from His Father," "Gordimer fulfils one of the literary roles she particularly has undertaken in her stories, to give a voice to those whose voices we usually do not hear because their race or level of education deprives them of attention or of access to the literate community."[46] "Letter from His Father" does indeed put the spotlight on Hermann Kafka, who, even after his death (he is writing his letter from the hereafter), retains the qualities that infuriated Kafka in his lifetime: he remains a domineering and self-righteous individual, torn between love for his son and resentment stemming from his conviction that Kafka has exposed the shameful secrets of his family.

The primary aim of Hermann's letter is to counter Kafka's accusation that he had a destructive influence on him. This he effects by stressing Kafka's difference from the rest of the family ("You were never like any other child"[47]) and by asserting that this difference was rooted in his nature rather than his upbringing. Indeed, throughout his letter Hermann describes Kafka as an

44 John Cooke, "'Nobody's Children: Families in Gordimer's Later Novels," in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, ed. Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1993), 31.

45 Nadine Gordimer to Timothy Seldes, 16 June 1983, Gordimer manuscripts.

46 Andrew Vogel Ettin, *Betrayals of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 133.

47 Nadine Gordimer, *Something Out There* (London: Cape, 1984), 42.

inscrutable other[48] whose unsettling effect on the family is partly attributed to his nature and partly to his ill will. The latter is the basis for Hermann's accusation against his son, which he reiterates throughout his letter—that of ingratitude. The recurrent argument is that while Kafka accepted his father's financial help, on which he depended most of his life, he flatly rejected all the values that Hermann held dear, such as his respect for the Jewish religion and tradition, as well as Hermann's dedication to his family. The logic of this argument is that Kafka scorned the values of his father—and through this the father himself—despite all the help and education he was given; at no point does Hermann consider that Kafka's rejection may have resulted precisely from the ways in which Hermann tried to instill those values in his son (this issue is addressed by Kafka in his letter, especially in his discussion of Judaism). Taking the cue from Kafka's letter, Hermann describes his son as a parasite: "The kind of vermin that doesn't only sting, but at the same time sucks blood to keep itself alive."[49] By emphasizing that the statement is a thin rephrasing of Kafka's words,[50] Hermann attempts to prove that it is not a subjective (and thus potentially refutable) accusation aimed at his son but an incontestable fact.

Throughout his letter, Hermann reiterates the point that their relationship was based on the purely one-sided dependence of the son on the father. This is clearly evident in his response to Kafka's story "The Judgment," or, to be more precise, to one of its interpretations:

> The wonderful discovery about that story, you might like to hear, it proves Hermann Kafka most likely didn't want his son to grow up and be a man, any more than his son wanted to manage without his parents' protection. The *meshuggener* who wrote that, may he get rich on it![51]

48 This view has some justification in Kafka's autobiographical writing. In his diary (entry dated 21 August 1913), Kafka describes himself as "a reserved, silent, unsocial, dissatisfied person," who lives in his family as "more strange than a stranger." Kafka, *Diaries, 1910–1923*, 231. He goes on to emphasize that his sole interest lies in literature, and it is this preoccupation that alienates him from his family: "I lack all aptitude for family life except, at best, as an observer." Franz Kafka, *Diaries, 1910–1923*, trans. Joseph Kresh, Martin Greenberg, Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 231.

49 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 54.

50 Hermann refers to Kafka's description of himself as "too clever, obsequious, parasitic and insincere." Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 54.

51 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 49.

The sarcasm—not without its unintended humorous effect—is meant to convey Hermann's indignation at the 'absurd' interpretation, but the result is that its irony turns back upon its author. In fact, Hermann's letter shows him as a doubting father, whose greatest regret is that Kafka eventually left him, moving out of the family house. To juxtapose Kafka's letter and Gordimer's story is to see a striking reversal of roles, as a result of which Hermann, while still the determined and overbearing figure that he was in his lifetime, is also a person overwhelmed by guilt and desperately seeking reconciliation with his silent son. Kafka's ambiguous silence is a sign of indifference, and, in this sense, it is a manifestation of power: his lifelong dependence on his father, both material and emotional, has come to a definite end. It seems that this is how Kafka's silence is interpreted by Hermann when he addresses his son with the words: "Your revenge, that you were too cowardly to take in life, you've taken here."[52] What Gordimer captures in Hermann's letter is what Ronald Hayman—the author of a Kafka biography that was familiar to her—wrote about the relationship between the son and the father: "In reality, most likely, Hermann Kafka had no more desire for his son to arrive at maturity and independence than Kafka had to manage without parental protection."[53]

The Late 1980s: A Father-Son Relationship in the Context of the Late Apartheid

Both in her prose and in her non-fiction writing Gordimer emphasized the importance of the writer's freedom to create outside of personal allegiances and political orthodoxies. As she pointed out in an interview by Diana Cooper-Clark, "the taking of this freedom is both the bravest and the monstrous side of what a writer *is*."[54] The comment about the writer's intellectual autonomy is resonant both in the context of "Letter from His Father" and a radically different story, "**The Moment Before the Gun Went Off**"[55] (*Harper's Magazine*, August 1988; *Jump*, 1991), in which she turned her attention to a rural Afrikaner community in the turbulent times of the late 1980s. In 1984, P. W. Botha declared

52 Gordimer, *Something Out There*, 56.

53 Ronald Hayman, *A Biography of Kafka* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981), 137.

54 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 228.

55 The story was first entitled "Culpable Homicide" (two other titles considered by Gordimer were "The Business" and "The Truth About the Country").

a State of Emergency, increasing military presence in townships, introducing stricter censorship of the media, and continuing the relentless persecution of political activists. Despite those measures, opposition to apartheid became stronger, both inside the country[56] and, no less importantly, on the part of the international community.[57] It is from the increasingly embattled perspective of the Afrikaners that we learn about the central event in the story: the tragic death of an African labourer, Lucas, from a stray bullet fired by his employer, Marais Van der Vyver, an Afrikaner farmer and a regional leader of the National Party. We are also told about the relationship between Van der Vyver and Lucas, which is compared to a friendship: Van der Vyver is quoted as saying: "He [Lucas] was my friend, I always took him hunting with me."[58] Van der Vyver's words are used as an argument against critics of apartheid, who—according to the Afrikaners—seek to impose a reductive interpretation on interracial relationships in South Africa, seeing them solely in terms of discrimination and exploitation. What neither the supporters nor the critics of apartheid know is that Lucas was Van der Vyver's son, whom he fathered with a black servant on his farm. The reason why this fact is hidden by Van der Vyver is that it would, no doubt, effectively compromise his standing in the Afrikaner community and jeopardise his political career (sexual relations between white and black South Africans were illegal from 1949 to 1985).

The experience of reading "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off" is that of being drawn closer to the central event: from the way it is reported by the foreign press, we move on to learn about how it is perceived by the local community. Of special interest here is the passage in the story which describes Lucas's funeral. Two people are at the centre of this description: Lucas's unnamed mother and Van Der Vyver himself. The woman stands silently above

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56 In the months between January and May of 1984, more than 14 attacks were organized by anti-apartheid opposition. The police responded by arresting and shooting the protesters. See: Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, *South Africa. The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (London: Routledge, 2011), 93.

57 Allister Sparks quotes the response of the then US Secretary of State, describing apartheid as "xenophobic outrage." Allister Sparks, *Tomorrow is Another Country*: *The Inside Story of South Africa's Negotiated Revolution* (Alexandria: Zebra Press, 1994), 70. He also mentions that this criticism only met with an increasingly relentless stance of the government, as P. W. Botha insisted on defending the country against what he saw as Western interference into domestic affairs.

58 Nadine Gordimer, *Jump and Other Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 112.

the grave of her son, accompanied by her parents ("The parents hold her as if she were a prisoner or a crazy woman to be restrained"[59]), while Van der Vyver stands on the other side of the grave with his wife, Alida, beside him:

> He, too, stares at the grave. The dead man's mother and he stare at the grave in communication like that between the black man outside and the white man inside the cab the moment before the gun went off.[60]

In this short passage, Gordimer moves from a general perception to a wholly different perspective, as if she suddenly decided to leave the limited viewpoint of the onlookers in order to formulate an insight which clearly belongs to an omniscient narrator, who knows of the intimate communication between the protagonists. This narrative perspective continues in the next paragraph, in which—after a spaced line dividing the second and third parts of the story—we learn that what Van der Vyver and Lucas felt before the tragic accident was "a moment of high excitement shared through the roof of the cab."[61] At this point, it is clear that the narrator is moving beyond what is generally known into the realm of feeling and intuition. The understanding between Van Der Vyver and Lucas is not formulated overtly and unambiguously; it implies closeness—the ability to understand each other without words—but, at the same time, distance in the sense that what binds the father and the son cannot be expressed in the present socio-political circumstances. This impossibility of uttering the truth remains at the centre of the story, as is evident from its last paragraph:

> How will they ever know, when they file newspaper clippings, evidence, proof, when they look at the photographs and see his face—guilty! guilty! they are right!—how will they know, when the police stations burn with all the evidence of what has happened now, and what the law made a crime in the past. How could they know that *they do not know*. Anything. The young black callously shot through the negligence of the white man was not the farmer's boy; he was his son.[62]

59 Gordimer, *Jump*, 116.

60 Gordimer, *Jump*, 116.

61 Gordimer, *Jump*, 116.

62 Gordimer, *Jump*, 117.

Once again, the reader is asked to look at the central event from the vantage point of the Afrikaner farmers, who are convinced that the event will be misreported to fit a particular vision of South Africa, one in which the black South Africans are treated with callous indifference by the Afrikaners. Gordimer, however, does not conclude the story with this narrative perspective; instead, she uses the viewpoint of the local Afrikaners to reveal information which is known neither to them nor to the anti-apartheid activists—namely, the fact that Lucas was Van Der Vyver's son. The last sentence is the only one in the whole story which combines three viewpoints: that of the critics of apartheid and the shared perspective of Van Der Vyver, Lucas's mother, and the omniscient narrator. We are confronted with an impossibility lying at the very heart of the story and creating the drama of the two silent protagonists standing above Lucas's grave: the fact that the whole truth about the central event may never be revealed.

The Late 1980s: Personal Conflicts and Political Tensions

Gordimer's preoccupation with language and narrative perspective, evident both in "Letter from His Father" and "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off," is also visible in "**A Journey**" (*The Irish Times*, 8 July 1989; *Jump*, 1991), which is as much about child-parent relationships as it is about the act of writing. The self-reflexive dimension of "A Journey" is clear at its beginning, in which the narrator, bearing some resemblance to Gordimer ("a lady with grey hair,"[63] who is a writer), sets out the situation which inspired her to write the story. As she mentions, during an overnight flight she had the opportunity to observe three passengers sitting near her: a young woman, her newly-born baby, and her thirteen-year-old son. The first part of the story, in which the narrator describes her encounter with the three fellow passengers, is followed by a brief history of the family, as narrated by the adolescent boy. It is from his perspective that we learn about a crisis in the marriage of his parents, the woman's pregnancy, the birth that she gives during her and her son's stay in Europe, and, finally, their subsequent return to Africa. The third and last part gives us insight into the tensions within the family from the vantage point of the husband and the father.

63 Gordimer, *Jump*, 149.

The first part of "A Journey" focuses on the complex and intimate mother-son relationship, which shows a clear influence of the Oedipus complex. The mother's pregnancy is described by the boy as the result of the father's forceful and violent intrusion into their lives: "I know about sex, of course, how she'd got pregnant, *what my father had done with her*."[64] The transformation of his mother's body is greeted with a feeling of insecurity, as if her pregnancy announced a new and yet unknown phase in their lives. For the boy, the new order means contesting the existing balance of power, most importantly, his father's authority. Looking at his father as he comes to collect them at the airport, the son is overcome by a new-found feeling of power: "Then I felt full of joy and strength, it was like being angry, but much better, much much better."[65]

The boy's narrative, which comprises the second part of "A Journey," is followed by the story of marital discord, as told by the woman's absent husband. While both in the son's story and in the father's narrative, the birth of the baby is seen as the arrival of a new order and a point of no return, in the case of the father, the newborn child carries the hope of a complete renewal and the opening up of a new chapter in their lives. Before his wife's unexpected pregnancy, the husband had an extramarital affair, which not only estranged him from his wife but also filled him with hatred towards her. The night when the baby was conceived is described chiefly in terms of the man's aggression: "more like a murder than a conception."[66] As he arrives at the airport to pick up his family and meet the baby for the first time, he looks at the grim surroundings—the airport building damaged in a period of political turmoil—and reflects on recent events in his life, both personal and political:

> He walks slowly into the airport building because this passage between low hedges of Christ's-thorn and hibiscus propped up like standard roses—nobody would believe what survives an attempted coup, while people are shot—is the way towards something that is both old and new—nobody would believe what a man and woman can survive, between themselves.[67]

64 Gordimer, *Jump*, 147 (my emphasis).

65 Gordimer, *Jump*, 152.

66 Gordimer, *Jump*, 154.

67 Gordimer, *Jump*, 153.

While the man's hope for a fresh start to his life refers chiefly to his family situation, his thoughts (called ironically "wisps of philosophical generalizing"[68]) also touch upon the recent upheavals in the unnamed country. Underlying the description of wild bushes on the way to the airport is a simple reflection on nature's silent resilience and its ability to survive through renewal (made even more pronounced by the explicit reference to Christ). The parallel between the personal and the political is based on the man's contention that the months of unrest, riddled with violence and aggression, can ultimately lead to a new order. The man certainly has good reason to formulate this thought—he is Economic Attaché to this country and knows that he will not be reassigned elsewhere after the coup—but the reflection strikes one as an instance of wishful thinking rather than a realistic appraisal of the political situation. Indeed, the man's contention that a complete renewal of his private life can emerge suddenly and miraculously out of the troubles caused by his egoism is undermined at the end of the story, when he confronts his adolescent son and finds an expression of hostility in his face. The scene in which the father discovers the son's silent rebellion against him calls into question the man's unrealistic hopes about a new order born out of the former state of violent injustice. It seems that what is questioned here is not the contention that the old can gradually give way to the new—or be reshaped into it—but that this process can be effected overnight, without confronting the consequences of one's previous actions.

In her article on the stories included in Gordimer's 1991 collection *Jump*, Jeanne Colleran asserts that "A Journey" is characterized by the fact that it "interrogates its own presumptions as well as its subject."[69] Colleran argues that the tripartite structure of the story has an important effect on its reading in that "it signals its own partiality."[70] What Colleran calls "the self-reflexive, self-questioning narrative of 'A Journey'"[71] is part of her larger argument that the truth about South Africa—as distinct from the truth about apartheid—is

68 Gordimer, *Jump*, 154.

69 Jeanne Colleran, "Archive of Apartheid Nadine Gordimer's Short Fiction at the End of the Interregnum," in *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, ed. Bruce King (London: Macmillan, 1993), 239.

70 Colleran, "Archive of Apartheid," 239.

71 Colleran, "Archive of Apartheid," 239.

"a fragmentary one, part of and partial to, the time and the teller."[72] While Colleran's comment on the relation between self-reflexivity and partiality in "A Journey" is compelling, I would add that the self-reflexivity of "A Journey" should also be viewed as an expression of Gordimer's belief in the artistic and political value of creative imagination. According to Gordimer, imagination has artistic value insofar as it enables the writer to describe the intricacies of human behaviour. The political value of imagination is that it constitutes the strongest proof of the writer's integrity and independence from the influence of the state.[73]

The 1990s and the 2000s: "Individuals Recreating Themselves"

In her 1997 lecture "The Status of the Writer in the World Today. Which World? Whose World?" Gordimer included the following quotation from Nikolai Gogol (or rather Vladimir Nabokov's paraphrase of Gogol's views): "The writer is both the repository of his people's ethos, and his revelation to them of themselves."[74] She concluded her lecture by addressing all African writers present: "Let our chosen status in the world be that of writers who seek exchanges of the creative imagination, ways of thinking and writing, of fulfilling the role of repository of the people's ethos, by opening it out, bringing to it a vital mixture of individuals and peoples recreating themselves."[75]

As a writer, Gordimer participated in the recreation of her nation by imagining a changed social order, or, to be more precise, anticipating changes in the existing social order. This reimagining is clearly visible in *None to Accompany Me* (1994), whose protagonist, Vera Stark, makes the bold decision to shape her personal life in accordance with the requirements of her professional vocation—namely, her work for a legal committee concerned with drafting the new constitution of post-apartheid South Africa. What is of utmost significance to Vera is responding adequately to the political events, even if this entails making

72 Colleran, "Archive of Apartheid," 238.

73 For an extended discussion of the role of imagination and its role in defying the political orthodoxies of the state see Gordimer's essay "The Writer's Imagination and the Imagination of the State" (1986). See: Nadine Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History*: *Notes from Our Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 191–194.

74 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 522.

75 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 531.

major changes in her life: "Perhaps the passing away of the old regime makes the abandonment of an old personal life also possible."[76]

It is worthwhile to note that Vera's comment on the need to reshape personal life in accordance with the demands of social and political developments immediately precedes a chapter in which she pays a visit to her daughter Annick, who, together with her partner Lou, has decided to adopt a black baby. As Vera observes the new parents' enthusiastic preoccupation with their baby, she feels strangely detached from the scene. Her inability to relate emotionally to Annick's life has its roots in her daughter's decision to find personal fulfilment in a homosexual relationship and to cement this relationship by adopting a child. That Vera does not reject this new model of a family is clear both from her words and her gestures. As she informs Annick of changes in her own life (the selling of the house and the separation from her husband, Bennet), she takes Annick's baby into her arms, which can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture that conveys her willingness to find her place in a new social order, as represented by Annick, Lou, and their infant daughter. The homosexual and interracial family model may be a new one, but it is formed from elements of the still-dominant heterosexual and patriarchal relationships. This is again symbolically represented by Annick and Lou's surreptitious acquisition of the female torsos sculpted by Bennet, which are then displayed in their home. As Barbara Temple-Thurston rightly maintains, these torsos "provide a new definition of home,"[77] and not only that, as in the new surroundings the sculptures also become a representation of homosexual desire.

The imperative that drives Vera Stark's daughter in her creation of a new home for her partner and her baby has been conveyed aptly and succinctly by Gordimer herself: "Reject the elements of family and take one of them to create a new form of relationship."[78] The comment just quoted is taken from a story originally titled "Another Life" (2002), written eight years after the publication of *None to Accompany Me* and published in Gordimer's penultimate collection *Loot and Other Stories* (2003) as part of the cycle "**Karma**." In the story, a lesbian couple decides against having a child through artificial insemination because in this process their child may inherit the genes of former victims or

76 Nadine Gordimer, *None to Accompany Me* (New York: Picador, 1994), 280.

77 Barbara Temple-Thurston, *Nadine Gordimer Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), 141.

78 Nadine Gordimer, *Loot and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 205.

oppressors in the times of apartheid. What underlies their need to separate themselves from the country's traumatic history is the fear that if they fail to do so, history may repeat itself, thus drawing them into the circle of accountability (and what stronger responsibility is there than for one's child—what the child may suffer and the suffering that he or she may inflict on others). The fact that the couple ultimately abandons the plans to have a child problematizes their conviction that it is possible—indeed, necessary—to decide on how the past affects the present by selecting those elements of the past that agree with their vision of life. What is criticized in the story is not the idea of grafting together different elements of the old social and political structures so as to transform them into something new, but rather the desire to do so without confronting the historical and ideological baggage that such a change inevitably brings to the present situation.

Gordimer's involvement with the beliefs and attitudes of "peoples recreating themselves" manifested itself in her exploration of the legacy of apartheid among South Africans of all races. In "The Dwelling Place of Words" (2001), Gordimer made the following comment: "In Africa, the experiences of colonialism, its apogee, apartheid, post-colonialism and new-nation conflicts, have been a powerful collective consciousness in African writers, black and white."[79] The task of confronting the legacy of apartheid is clearly present in Gordimer's late work, including her "Karma" cycle. Especially relevant in the context of the present chapter is the second story in "Karma," which concentrates on a mixed-race family in the times of apartheid. The protagonist of this story is a white woman, Denise Appolis, who was abandoned as a baby and raised by a coloured family. At the centre of the story is Denise's gradual estrangement from her parents, Abraham and Elsie, as the two struggle financially to create for Denise a privileged life away from her humble surroundings in the conviction that by doing so, they are granting their adopted daughter the life of happiness to which she is entitled as a white person ("Happiness as being white: no boundaries! God's will"[80]). When Denise follows the path sanctioned by her parents, moving out of the family home and drastically reducing contact with them, they are torn by conflicting emotions of love, grief, and anger. Confounded by their own reaction, they try to explain away their emotions by forcing themselves to see Denise's estrangement as a logical progression

79 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 593.

80 Gordimer, *Loot*, 178.

in her life. The failed nature of this attempt is evident in the halting syntax of a statement giving us insight into Abraham and Elsie's state of mind: "For her to leave them was the natural process of their act of love for her."[81] This short and fragmented sentence disrupts the steady pace of the narrative, as if Gordimer was forcing us to reread the statement and fully attend to its thwarted, circuitous logic.

As Denise finds secretarial work and moves to another part of the city, it seems as if her life will be no different from that of other white South Africans (apart from her occasional visits to the township where her parents live), and it is only when she is on the point of marrying a white man that she discovers the legal consequences of her origins. Her humiliating and unsuccessful attempts to reclassify as a white South African so that she can marry the man lead the young couple to desperation and, ultimately, to the decision that the only choice left to them is to leave South Africa, "a home they can't have."[82] In this sense, Denise's story is about the promise of a peaceful and prosperous life which is painfully denied: even if she does manage to find happiness with her husband, it will be away from her native country and her parents.

The 1990s and the 2000s: Relationships between Parents and Adult Children

Gordimer's late stories—by which I mean those published in her last two collections—are characterised by her focus on relationships between parents and *adult* children, especially in the context of discovering one's personal connection with the past. One such story is "**L,U,C,I,E**" (*Granta*, 30 September 1993; *Loot*, 2003). Its female protagonist, the eponymous Lucie, presents herself as a person unconstrained by historical or political loyalties, who lives in the present and does not have time to dwell on the past. Despite this unsentimental attitude, she decides to indulge her father by joining him in his nostalgic search for his roots in a small village in Italy. As she explains in a tone of dry precision, her initial plan was to treat this holiday as a tour of duty on which she was expected to give her father the kind of support needed after his wife's death. In the course of their stay in the Italian village, Lucie's scepticism regarding their sentimental journey undergoes a subtle change, as she realizes one night—alone

81 Gordimer, *Loot*, 181.

82 Gordimer, *Loot*, 189.

in her room and listening to the fading sound of the church bells—that the trip has had a curious effect on her: she has started to see the village mostly in terms of her father's memories. The visit to the cemetery, which concludes their trip, makes this sense even stronger: for Lucie, it is like visiting the past enshrined in the names on the gravestones, including the name of her paternal grandmother, Lucie. While it would be an overstatement to claim that this sudden confrontation with the past brings about a change in Lucie's individualist and self-reliant philosophy of life, she is influenced by her discovery that the past is not closed but remains in constant, if ambiguous, communication with the present. The connection between the past and the present is formulated at the end of the story, which includes a brief reference to a recently killed motorcyclist. The image of the motorcyclist, speeding on his machine to meet his death, may be taken to represent the swift passage of time, but this image is also closely connected with Lucie's discovery that the present can be found in traces of the past. The latter notion is related to her new-found conviction about the importance of the past in shaping the present moment.

Relationships between parents and children continued to inspire Gordimer in the last years of her long career. In "**A Beneficiary**" (*The New Yorker*, 14 May 2007; *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 2007), Gordimer tells the story of a twenty-eight-year-old woman named Charlotte (or Charlie, as she is called by her father), who, after the death of her mother, discovers that she is the daughter of a highly regarded actor, Rendal Harris, with whom her mother, Laila de Morne, had an affair in her days as an aspiring actress. As Harris visits her city with a series of theatre performances, Charlie's admiration for the man's talent and commitment to his artistic vocation grows into a kind of friendship. Despite their mutual understanding, she does not reveal the identity of her mother, and it is her father who brings up the name of his former wife, thus giving Charlie the necessary impulse to reveal to Rendall Harris that she is the daughter of Laila de Morne. While this confession provokes no significant reaction from Harris, it does bring about a change in Charlie in that it leads her to turn to her foster father with love and affection: "She held him, he kissed her cheek and she pressed it against his. Nothing to do with DNA."[83] The conclusion brings a sense of resolution, rarely seen in Gordimer's stories, and by all means a happy ending to Charlie's confusion.

83 Nadine Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 135.

The ending of "A Beneficiary" emphasizes the unquestionable and selfless love of the father for the daughter, but the story also explores the relationship between the daughter and the mother. As we learn at the beginning of the story, despite the fact that after the divorce, Laila was given custody of Charlie, the daughter always felt closer to her father: "As Charlotte has grown up she's felt more compatible with him than with her, fondly though she feels towards her mother's—somehow—childishness."[84] With the discovery of her father's letter, this patronising attitude towards her mother's eccentricities changes: Charlie begins to seriously reflect on the life of her mother and—to some extent—tries to relive it in her relationship with Rendall Harris. It seems that the short-lived friendship with the actor gives her the chance not only to intuitively ascertain whether or not he is her father but—subconsciously—also to create a sense of closeness with her departed mother. For a brief while, Charlie becomes the eponymous beneficiary not only of her mother's material belongings but also of her life, with its history of relationships with glamorous people and her artistic ambitions. What she initially saw as her mother's pretentious bohemianism—a thin veil imperfectly concealing her immaturity—later appears to have been the result of a conscious choice, a kind of gamble that Laila took and ultimately lost because she lacked the talent to substantiate her ambitions.

The complex relationship between the daughter and the mother is conveyed ironically in the straightforward and seemingly unproblematic sentence "Laila was Laila," which recurs as many as five times in the story.[85] The first and most obvious reference is to the shared understanding between Charlie and her father as to who her mother was and what she represented—the simple statement that Laila was extravagant and unique, and that this fact is taken for granted by both the father and the daughter. As the story progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that the tautological statement obscures rather than explains Laila's life; in other words, it becomes a convenient, shorthand expression, which only superficially hides the complexity of Laila's motivations and actions.

It can be concluded that Gordimer's stories published in the late 1990s and the 2000s, when compared to those that she wrote from the 1950s to the 1980s, paint a more positive picture of parent-child relations. Most late stories by Gordimer describe relationships between ageing parents and adult children

84 Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 115.

85 Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 118, 125, 126, 127, 134.

in which conflicts have been resolved and what remains is a bond resembling a friendship, capable of bringing support and reassurance while at the same time being distant enough not to grow bitter. In Gordimer's fourteenth novel, *Get a Life* (2005), the friendship between the mother and the son—Lyn and Paul Bannerman—is based both on their shared values in life (they are dedicated to a cause that lies outside of their personal lives: Lyn to social justice and Paul to environmentalism) and a stance of care for each other, which is built on their deep conviction that since they lead separate existences, they can at best try to assist each other in their problems.[86] In Gordimer's late works, this respect for boundaries, based on the conviction that each person is responsible for their own choices and has to confront their own destiny, is the prerequisite for a successful and mutually satisfying relationship, including one between parents and children.

Conclusion: Relationships of Power and Domination

As I claim in this book, Gordimer looked upon writing as both "an enactment of life"[87] and "an exploration of life"[88]—an exploration that includes the forces that bind people together into social units, for example that of the family. Gordimer's deep preoccupation with families in her short stories resulted both from her fascination with dynamic, unpredictable, and nuanced human motivations, as they manifest themselves in human interactions, and, no less significantly, from the conviction that it is in families that beliefs and attitudes—be they conservative, liberal, or radical—are disseminated or challenged. In other words, the truth that Gordimer sought in her parent-child stories was both intensely personal and deeply political.

Numerous and varied, the stories discussed in this chapter have one feature in common: they explore "the way human beings use power in their relationships."[89] Gordimer's interest in the workings of power in human interactions went hand in hand with her tendency to concentrate on the weaker participant of this dynamic: the one who is dominated and shaped according to the personal

86 This conviction is clearly expressed in the sentence: "The generations can't help each other, in the existential affront." Nadine Gordimer, *Get a Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 134.

87 Nadine Gordimer, *Writing and Being* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 18.

88 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 591.

89 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 259.

and ideological agenda of the stronger person. While reasons for such behaviour have to be examined separately in every story, it seems that the desire to dominate the child can, at least to some extent, be attributed to the parents' desire to see in their child's life a confirmation of their own values and beliefs. This psychological mechanism seems to be one of the factors responsible for the circulation of various ideologies within the family.

The discussion of family relationships in Gordimer's prose has brought us to the overarching theme of her stories: her insistence that it is only through the forging of equal and mutually fulfilling relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children that the family as a social unit can thrive and contribute to the development of the individual. As I argued in this chapter and in Chapter Five, this theme is elaborated by way of negative critique—the exploration of various unjust and unequal relationships within the family. In the next chapter, "the way human beings use power in their relationships"[90] will be discussed in the context of their attitude to the environment.

90 Bazin and Seymour, eds., *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, 259.

Chapter Seven

“An Exploration of Self and of the World”: Social and Environmental Issues

“Being Here”: The Writer’s Place in the World

At the beginning of her Nobel Lecture “Writing and Being,” delivered on 7 December 1991, Nadine Gordimer addressed the topic of the writer’s place and role in the world. She referred to Borges’s story “The God’s Script” (also known as “The Writing of the God”; the original title is “La escritura del dios”), narrated by an imprisoned Aztec priest whose only hope of escaping the prison is to find and read aloud the divine script in the fur of a jaguar in the adjacent cell. Writers, argued Gordimer, find themselves in a similar position insofar as “we spend our lives attempting to interpret through the word the readings we take in the societies, the world of which we are part. It is in this sense, this inextricable, ineffable participation, that writing is always and at once an exploration of self and of the world; of individual and collective being. Being here.”[1] The starting point of this chapter is the claim that Gordimer’s concern with the natural environment is present as an important part of her stance as a writer and public intellectual; in other words, the imperative to explore the world by means of the written word refers not only to the world of people but also to the natural environment, first of all, because the two cannot be separated and, secondly, because socio-political and ecological critiques in Gordimer’s prose—here I mean specifically her stories—are often closely connected. In other words, “being here”[2] means being in a world which is shaped by social, political, and environmental conditions.

The aim of this chapter is to explore Gordimer’s stance on social and environmental issues in her short stories. This discussion is inspired by Lawrence Buell’s call to “think more inclusively of environmentality as a property of

1 Nadine Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History: Notes from Our Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 196.

2 Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History*, 196.

any text—to maintain that all human artifacts bear such traces, and at several stages: in the composition, the embodiment, and the reception."[3] Environmentality, defined in this way, is not limited to—but can be seen as—a feature that emerges in the act of interpretation; in other words, it is a function of reading. Equally important for this discussion is Buell's notion of the environmental unconscious and Byron Caminero-Santangelo's term socioecological unconscious, both of which address culturally and ideologically conditioned simplifications and distortions in our perception of the environment. Buell's and Caminero-Santangelo's relevance for this study will be discussed in the following section, which will also refer to Graham Huggan's and Helen Tiffin's contribution to Gordimer studies in the context of postcolonial ecocriticism.

Approaches to Ecocriticism: Huggan, Tiffin, Buell, and Caminero-Santangelo

While the topic of Gordimer's attentiveness to the natural environment has received little attention in the analyses of her short stories, the issue of man's relationship with nature in her novels has been fairly comprehensively discussed, especially in *The Conservationist* (1974) and *Get a Life* (2005). Among the critical commentaries on the former novel, the two that deserve special attention are the ecocritical readings by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin. In their landmark study *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, Huggan and Tiffin argue for a literary criticism that remains sensitive to ways in which language shapes our historically- and culturally-determined understanding of the environment. Inspired by Anthony Vital's essay "Toward an African Ecocriticism,"[4] Huggan and Tiffin adopt an approach that accounts for "the historical interaction between ideologies of empire and ideologies of genre."[5] This mode of ecocriticism is put to use in their readings of a range of postcolonial texts, including *The*

3 Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 25.

4 Huggan and Tiffin adopt an approach that accounts for "the complex interplay of social history with the natural world, and how language both shapes and reveals such interactions." Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 15. See also: Anthony Vital, "Toward an African Ecocriticism: Postcolonialism, Ecology, and Life and Times of Michael K," *Research in African Literatures* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 90, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20109561.

5 Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 15.

Conservationist. Huggan and Tiffin show how the novel's main protagonist, the wealthy industrialist and eponymous 'conservationist' Mehring, tries to turn his farm into "a classic modern pastoral retreat,"[6] leading to a spectacular failure, as a result of which the farm ultimately becomes "the site of his deepest fears and anxieties."[7] The ending of the novel, when the body of a hastily buried, unnamed black man resurfaces as a result of a storm, points to the circular logic by which the land returns to its original, black owners.

Four years after the release of *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* in 2010, Byron Caminero-Santangelo published a study which he partly devoted to a critical reading of *The Conservationist* and *Get a Life* (2005). In his analysis of *The Conservationist*, Caminero-Santangelo points to what he calls "one of the deep ironies of the novel"[8]—the fact that Mehring's farm offers an image of him which is radically different from the one that he tries to create and impose on others. What Mehring tries to suppress is the fact that his ownership of the farm is made possible by the system of social exploitation created by apartheid. According to Caminero-Santangelo, Mehring's efforts are chiefly aimed at maintaining "not the natural integrity of the farm, but an organization and image of it that allow for his pleasure and reinforce his identity."[9] The body of the anonymous black man that resurfaces towards the end of the novel becomes a powerful symbol of what Mehring "does not want to acknowledge and that threatens his identity"[10]—the history of oppression that is an inextricable part of his ownership of the farm and of his attempts to transform the farm into a pastoral retreat for himself and his mistress.

Caminero-Santangelo's reading of Gordimer's novel is significant in the discussion of her stories because of the critical methodology that he elaborates in his book. Of special importance here is Lawrence Buell's concept of the environmental unconscious, defined as "habitually foreshortened environmental perception."[11] Buell's term, based on the contention that the aim of ecocriticism

6 Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 115.

7 Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 116.

8 Byron Caminero-Santangelo, *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice and Political Ecology* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014), 115.

9 Caminero-Santangelo, *Different Shades of Green*, 115.

10 Caminero-Santangelo, *Different Shades of Green*, 116.

11 Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 18.

is to expose culturally-ingrained failures of environmental imagination, continues to be influential among ecocritics.[12] When used in Caminero-Santangelo's discussion of *The Conservationist*, it leads to the following important conclusion: "*The Conservationist* focuses on 'the environmental unconscious' by bringing attention to aspects of environment unrecognized by character and, possibly, by readers, as well as by drawing attention to the forces that create that unconscious."[13] Caminero-Santangelo adds that Gordimer's novel "points to the ways that environment cannot escape from being shaped by ideology, as well as the ways that environment is crucial for the operation and disruption of ideology."[14] The connection between the environment and ideology is Caminero-Santangelo's significant contribution to environmental criticism. Positing that Buell's exclusive concentration on the environment as the most fundamental force shaping individuals results in a failure to account for the influence of politics and ideology, Caminero-Santangelo argues for a more balanced perspective. He observes that Gordimer is interested in "the socioecological unconscious"[15] since "ideology and environment are involved in a mutual determination in her novels."[16] Using his notion of "the socioecological unconscious," Caminero-Santangelo shows that Gordimer's protagonists betray a certain failure of vision with respect to their surroundings, thus alerting her readers to the fact that ideology has a key influence on our perception of the environment and our place in it.

The 1950s: Exposing the Delusions of "a Third" Way

As I noted in Chapter Two, one common feature of Gordimer's stories published from the late 1940s to the early 1960s is that they frequently explore the racist mindset of their first-person narrators. Belonging to this category is "**Six Feet of the Country**" (*The New Yorker*, 23 May 1953; *Six Feet of the Country*,

12 Most recently, Timothy Clark has written about "the revisionist force of ecocriticism," pointing out that "[a]t issue is the gradual and uncomfortable realisation of just how deeply inherited modes of thinking and reading are contaminated by a destructive anthropocentrism." Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 19.

13 Caminero-Santangelo, *Different Shades of Green*, 120.

14 Caminero-Santangelo, *Different Shades of Green*, 121.

15 Caminero-Santangelo, *Different Shades of Green*, 113.

16 Caminero-Santangelo, *Different Shades of Green*, 114.

1956), which is discussed here insofar as it focuses on the consciousness of its male narrator in the context of his attitude to the environment, specifically a farm that he runs together with his wife. By exploring the man's perception of his farm—as a place of safety, peacefulness, and privilege—Gordimer points to the socioecological unconscious that masks his attempts to distance himself from an unjust social system while at the same time drawing benefits from it.

"Six Feet of the Country" was published at a time when early apartheid legislation[17] started to have widespread effect on the lives of black South Africans and met with growing opposition, especially in cities.[18] Social unrest is felt in the background of the story when its protagonist and narrator, a middle-aged affluent businessman, notes that by buying a farm outside of Johannesburg, he and his wife have escaped the tensions in the city. While the man owns the farm, he is quick to distance himself from how this may shape his perception in the eyes of others by claiming that neither he nor his wife can be called farmers. Neither a city dweller nor a farmer, he insists on what he calls "a third"[19] way—that of living in the relative safety of the countryside, away from social conflicts, but without becoming a farmer who has severed his connections with the city. The third way that he has forged for himself is also that of neither condoning nor rejecting apartheid; instead, he accepts apartheid as a fact and a rather convenient one at that: speaking for himself and his wife, he observes: "Our relationship with the blacks is almost feudal. Wrong, I suppose, obsolete, but more comfortable all around."[20]

The third way that the man has created for himself and his wife is based on the illusion of living in an ahistorical, pastoral world of the countryside,

17 Those included the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Act (1950), banning cross-racial marriages and sexual relations, the Population Registration Act (1950), creating the division into three races (White, Coloured, and Native), the Native Laws Amendment Act (1952), severely restricting the right of black South Africans to live in urban areas, the Bantu Education Act (1953), leading to segregated education in schools, and the Extension of University Education Act (1959), extending this principle to higher education.

18 In April 1952, the Defiance Campaign, initiated by the ANC (the African National Congress) and the SAIC (the South African Indian Council), resulted in widespread protests against apartheid laws, leading to the imprisonment of 8,500 people and the banning of most ANC leaders.

19 Nadine Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country: Fifteen Short Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 2.

20 Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country*, 3.

safely insulated from the turbulent events in the town but benefitting from the unequal balance of power between the races. Keen to maintain this illusion, the man insists that the "almost feudal" relations between himself, his wife, and their black servants are reciprocal and based on mutual benefit: while the role of the servants is to provide cheap labour, making it possible to run the farm, he and his wife give them safety from police raids—a regular occurrence in the city. This protective—and patronizing—attitude is supplemented by his wife's acts of charity towards their servants' children, as well as the ill and the incapacitated. The socioecological unconscious that Gordimer creates in her story points to the white protagonists' illusion of the farm as a place apart from the injustices of apartheid, built on relations different from those that characterize the discriminatory and exploitative cross-racial relations in the city.

The illusion of a harmonious cooperation on the farm is soon stretched to its limits, as the man is confronted with a disruption of his peaceful life. Forced to attend to arrangements connected with the sudden and tragic death of his servant's brother, he is no longer able to sustain his carefully cultivated illusion of a distant presence on the farm—neither a farmer nor a visitor. This illusion is undermined on three distinct occasions, during which he is made self-conscious about his presence: on seeing the body of the deceased man, witnessing the funeral, and—when it becomes clear that the authorities mistakenly sent the wrong body—being on the receiving end of a speech (incomprehensible, since it is delivered in an African language) made by the father of the dead man. On all those occasions, the man feels out of place: it is as if he has been forced out of his comfortable state of silent presence and suddenly obligated to take responsibility for the events on the farm.

As he is pressured to take a stance against the outrageous negligence of the authorities, the man tries to reassure his servant by invoking his authority as a white South African farmer: "The *Baas* is seeing to it for you, Petrus."[21] Ironically, the man finds himself assuming the role that he was careful to reject, doing so in an attempt to defend the authorities that he despises. Nevertheless, this should not come as a surprise: the beginning of the story makes it clear that it is on the injustices of apartheid that the man depends to construct his "third way"; indeed, he is in a position to distance himself from the farm precisely because he can depend on the cheap and reliable labour of his servants. The narrator's silent dependence on an unjust social system attracted

21 Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country*, 13.

the attention of Graham Huggan, who, in his article on Gordimer's early stories, writes about "the narrator's failure to recognize that the third possibility, the one he has not provided for at all, is that his own patriarchal values are complicitous with the more obviously divisive and inhumane practices of the apartheid state."[22] This failure, Huggan points out, is "the major source of irony in the story."[23]

Continuing the discussion of irony in "Six Feet of the Country," it can be added that what is also ironic in the story is the unexpected breakdown of cooperation between the white farmer and the authorities. Counting on the state to support his li(f)e of disinvolvement and passivity, the man finds himself first frustrated and then infuriated by the empty promises made by the authorities. He fails to recognize the simple fact that those in power have the same modus operandi as himself, namely, postponing the truth about a given situation until it dies in silence. This tendency is mirrored in the actions of the protagonist, who continues to repeat the same assurances to Lucas, noting that "the voice in which I said it was the same, every evening it sounded weaker."[24] As the man's promises become less credible, it becomes increasingly apparent that the illusion of his farm as a safe retreat from the injustices of apartheid and from his vague guilt as a member of the hegemonic class is unsustainable, since he too is deeply embroiled in the system from which he reaps economic and social benefits. It is this ironic failure of the man to maintain the illusion of his farm as a place of peaceful, untroubled, and unproblematic coexistence between the masters and the servants that emphasizes the socioecological unconscious in the story.

To conclude this reading of "Six Feet of the Country," I would like to come back to Huggan and Tiffin's analysis of *The Conservationist* as an anti-pastoral novel in their study *Postcolonial Ecocriticism.* At the end of their discussion, Huggan and Tiffin also refer to "Six Feet of the Country," which predates the novel by twenty-one years. In Huggan and Tiffin's view, *The Conservationist* "completes the recovery process initiated in Gordimer's earlier short story, 'Six Feet of the Country,' in which an unidentified, black corpse, officially discarded but finally given a makeshift local burial, symbolically reclaims the space from

22 Graham Huggan, "Echoes from Elsewhere: Gordimer's Short Stories as Social Critique," Research *in African Literatures* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 65, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3820037.

23 Huggan, "Echoes from Elsewhere," 65.

24 Gordimer, *Six Feet of the Country*, 14.

which it was previously evicted—at the white authorities' expense."[25] If Gordimer's novel does enact a "recovery process" by which the body of an anonymous black man reclaims the land that it once inhabited, this process is problematic precisely because of the man's anonymity: there is no indication whether he ever lived on the land on which he is about to be buried. As it turns out, the authorities mistakenly returned the wrong body to the grieving family; what is more, they are unable—or unwilling—to rectify this mistake. Discovered in the course of the funeral, the mistake leads to a dramatic scene, in which the grieving mourners give expression to their justified outrage. What is equally important is that the uncovering of the shocking truth about the identity of the body leads to the disruption of the funeral. While we may presume that the body was probably buried out of respect for the man, it is significant that the burial is not even mentioned in passing. Instead, the story ends with the realization that the burial of Petrus's brother will perhaps never take place; as a result, the family has been denied its right to bury their dead relative. If there is a "recovery process" in the story, it is one which is totally unsuccessful.

The Late 1950s: The Colonial Notion of Nature as Wilderness

Gordimer's exploration of the socioecological unconscious in the attitudes of South Africans continued in "**The Gentle Art**" (*Mademoiselle*, November 1959; *Friday's Footprint*, 1960), published four years after "Six Feet of the Country." The story focuses on an episode in the life of Vivien McEwen, who, in an attempt to break away from the dreary routine of life in Johannesburg, together with her husband joins a band of crocodile hunters. Vivien's enthusiasm for the hunt is present everywhere in the story, as is her fascination with the chief hunter, Jimmy Baird. Commenting on Vivien's reaction to Baird, Roger Angell compared Gordimer's story—not without justification—to Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber."[26] Angell then pointed to the contrast between the two women in the story: the expressive and imaginative Vivien, and the placid and practical Mrs. Baird. If this is the focus of the story, wrote Angell, then the crucial passage comes towards the end, when Vivien asks Mrs. Baird what she was doing during the hunt, only to receive the simple response:

25 Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, 116.

26 Roger Angell to Nadine Gordimer, 5 November 1957. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

“I waited.”[27] In her reply to Angell’s letter, Gordimer supported his interpretation, adding that there are two contrasts at work in the story: that between Vivien and Mrs. Baird, and that between Vivien’s romantic conception of the Bairds’ life and the reality.[28]

Analysing more closely Vivien’s attitude to Jimmy Baird, it becomes apparent that her thinly-veiled attraction to him is conditioned by her romantic perception of wilderness as “the last bastion of rugged individualism”[29] and a place where the individual can escape the confines of civilized life. Ironically, Baird, whom Vivien sees as the epitome of assertive and attractive masculinity, is kind and considerate to other human beings while at the same time being cruel to crocodiles, whose life he sees as totally subordinate to his needs and desires. During hunting, he ensures several times that his guests are comfortable, and, when it becomes increasingly likely that they may return empty-handed, he illegally kills a young specimen of a crocodile for the enjoyment of his guests. The act of killing in no way resembles Vivien’s romantic (and colonial) notions of the struggle between man and nature, in which the former emerges victorious: Jimmy Baird, quite simply, approaches the crocodile, aims a rifle at its head, and pulls the trigger:

> there it was, gazing, in the eternity of a split second, not three feet away, and Jimmy Baird’s calm, compassionate voice saying, “Right,” and the gun swiftly on his shoulder and the crack beside her [Vivien] where he stood. Then the pale gaze coming from the dark forehead exploded; it blew up as if from within, and where the gaze had been there was a soft pink mess of brain with the scarlet wetness of blood and the mother-of-pearl sheen of muscle.[30]

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27 Nadine Gordimer, *Friday’s Footprint and Other Stories* (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), 124.

28 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 15 November 1957. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

29 William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader*, ed. Ken Hiltner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 107. As Cronon writes in the context of the frontier myth, “[t]he mythic frontier individualist was almost always masculine in gender: here, in the wilderness, a man could be a real man, the rugged individual he was meant to be before civilization sapped his energy and threatened his masculinity.” Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” 108.

30 Gordimer, *Friday’s Footprint*, 120–121.

We should not miss the irony in Gordimer's description of a 'compassionate' butcher, who has already killed a large part of the local crocodile population and is now indiscriminately slaughtering the younger specimens too, all the time emphasizing that the kind of death he deals to the animals is swift and merciful. The act of killing, which Vivien insists on seeing as "wonderful," "splendid," and "terrific,"[31] is not a "gentle art" but rather a cruel and exploitative practice. Vivien's strongly enthusiastic, almost delirious reaction to the killing of the animal shows the extent of her fascination with power and violence: in her view, the only possible relationship that a man can have with respect to nature is that of aggressive domination.

Gordimer's irony takes aim at Vivien's wholehearted embracing of colonial stereotypes, creating her own kind of the environmental unconscious, namely, her failure to see the violence of the hunters, as well as their thoughtless exploitation of nature. Moreover, Gordimer also exposes Vivien's tendency to romanticize and mythologize the wild, as is apparent from the following passage: "The night river closed away behind them. It went back where it came from; from the world of sleep, of eternity and darkness, the place before birth, after death—all those ideas with which the flowing continuity of dark water is bound up."[32] The intentionally careless, almost impatient description of the river (as if the narrator assumed that the readers would know precisely how wilderness was seen by the protagonists) highlights the stereotypical nature of the characters' perception, which serves as a basis for an exploitative and violent attitude towards the natural environment.

If Gordimer's intention in "The Gentle Art" was to expose the environmental unconscious by presenting an ironic critique of the colonial paradigm of wilderness as a mysterious, potentially dangerous territory waiting to be conquered and subdued, then this aim is partly compromised by the narrator's own implication in such stereotypes. This becomes apparent in the passage that concentrates on the appearance of the protagonist, who is described as belonging partly to civilization (she has spent all of her life in Johannesburg) and partly to nature ("She was a dark woman, rather plain, with a very small head; ... rather reptilian itself... She might have come out of the night river"[33]). It is as if the narrator could not help mythologizing the woman, thus putting

31 Gordimer, *Friday's Footprint*, 121.

32 Gordimer, *Friday's Footprint*, 123.

33 Gordimer, *Friday's Footprint*, 122.

her mysterious femininity in opposition to the hunter's wife, whose dull domesticity represents a typically masculine perception of nature.[34] If Vivien's decision to join the company of the men, rather than that of the silent and subdued woman, represents Gordimer's decision to contest the colonial idea of nature, then it is largely unsuccessful since the connection between femininity and wild nature that the story draws is also essentially colonial.

The 1960s: Analysing a Postcolonial Narrative of Development

While the previous section has exposed certain colonial preconceptions about nature, this subchapter will demonstrate that the concept of the socioecological unconscious can also be applied to analyse the fallacies and simplifications in liberal discourses of social and political development. This tendency is characteristic of Gordimer's political and artistic stance in the 1960s, which led her to redefine her conception of the short story and, more widely, her understanding of writing and the role of the writer. Starting from the mid-1960s, Gordimer's stories began to show—in Gordimer's words—"my increasing involvement with—not politics, but the things that politics do to people."[35] Stronger emphasis on politics in her writing coincided with Gordimer's political radicalization, evident in her insistence that South Africa needed profound change. Convinced that this change could only be effected by scrutinising the existing attitudes and beliefs, Gordimer turned her attention to white South Africans, arguing for the need to redefine their place in the country. As it was mentioned in Chapter Two, Gordimer argued that "whites will have to take their attitudes apart and assemble afresh their ideas of themselves. We shall have to accept the black premise that the entire standpoint of *being white* will have to shift."[36]

Gordimer's stance of self-scrutiny is evident in her sixth collection, *Livingstone's Companions* (1971). The eponymous story in this volume, discussed

34 Carolyn Merchant convincingly argues that the colonial enterprises were largely based on "masculine perception of nature as a mother and bride whose primary function was to comfort, nurture, and provide for the well-being of the male." Carolyn Merchant, "Nature as Female," in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader*, ed. Ken Hiltner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 14.

35 Nadine Gordimer to Roger Angell, 1 May 1964. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

36 Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times: Writing and Living, 1954-2008* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 282. The quoted passage is part of Gordimer's lecture "What Being a South African Means to Me," which she delivered at the University of Cape Town in 1977.

in Chapter Two, shows Gordimer's deconstruction of liberalism—a political and ideological stance that she had adopted in the 1950s but rejected in the late 1960s. Another story in which she explored the consciousness of white Africans is "**Inkalamu's Place**" (*Inkululeko* (1.3), 1965; *Livingstone's Companions*, 1971). "Inkalamu's Place" takes the form of an autobiographical essay in which the daughter of a former colonial official, now a member of a United Nations commission, describes an episode from a visit to an unnamed African country that celebrates its independence. Taking this opportunity, she pays a visit to the house of a colonial named Inkalamu Williamson, now deceased, who in her childhood used to be an influential figure. Her visit to Inkalamu's house, where in the distant past she used to play with his children, is a nostalgic one, but it soon becomes a background against which the woman builds her criticism of the values once held by him.

The first sentence of "Inkalamu's Place" ("Inkalamu Williamson's house is sinking and I don't suppose it will last out the next few rainy seasons"[37]) paints the picture of a dilapidated house, on the brink of ruin. As Dominic Head observes, the house functions as a symbol of the colonial legacy in Africa: "the empty house, formerly owned by the eponymous Kurtz-type character, is a succinct image of colonial dissolution."[38] Indeed, Inkalamu is described as a white colonizer who has decided to treat his superior position in the colonial economy as an opportunity to fashion himself as a "lordly eccentric"[39] with infinite power over his inferiors, including his numerous children.

While Inkalamu is no longer alive (seven years have passed since his death), his house still bears marks of his former presence and the status that he was keen to create for himself. The narrator is quick to notice the irony in Inkalamu's attempts to build for himself "a sandcastle reproduction of a large, calendar-picture English country house."[40] The fact that this lordly mansion is built out of mud points to Inkalamu's attempts to use the natural materials available to him in such a way as to fashion for himself a life that is both familiar to him and superior to the one that he could have enjoyed at home (the narrator notes that his house, as well as the alley of jacaranda trees leading up to

37 Nadine Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 93.

38 Dominic Head, *Nadine Gordimer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 177.

39 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 95.

40 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 95.

it, expresses "Inkalamu's style [which] was that of the poor boy who has found himself the situation in which he can play at being the lordly eccentric"[41]).

The circular logic that the narrator emphasizes in the story is that a house built out of natural resources is now—with the passing of Inkalamu—gradually being returned to nature. Images of the rapid deterioration of Inkalamu's house abound in the story: the entrance to his mansion is "blurred with overgrowth,"[42] and the house itself has "eroded walls"[43] as a result of heavy rainfall. Entering the house, the narrator sees "shelves . . . wrenched from the wall,"[44] disarranged papers, and moulding books. The gradual destruction of Inkalamu's books can be viewed as a symbolic bankruptcy of the intellectual and colonial legacy in Africa. In this sense, the moulding books represent the slow but gradual process of decolonization:

> How good that it was all being taken apart by insects, washed away by the rain, disappearing into the earth, carried away and digested, fragmented to compost. I was glad that Inkalamu's children were free of it.[45]

The fall of Inkalamu's house is presented as the last natural and organic stage of the liberation process. After being deserted by its previous inhabitants—a clear symbol of the country's liberation from colonial oppression—it gradually falls into ruin and, consequently, into oblivion. We are led to understand that Inkalamu's legacy will soon cease to exist, forgotten by everyone, including his children. These images of decomposition are instrumental in creating a narrative of progress according to which the colonial legacy is forgotten (and not silenced or suppressed), giving way to democratic changes.

The narrator's rhetorical strategy in the story—to 'naturalize' socio-political changes by referring to the environment—brings us to Byron Caminero-Santangelo's notion of the socioecological unconscious. In his discussion of Gordimer's *The Conservationist*, Caminero-Santangelo analyses the mutual influence of ideology and the environment. As he writes, Gordimer's novel "points to the ways that environment cannot escape from being shaped by ideology, as

41 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 95.

42 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 95.

43 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 96.

44 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 97.

45 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 98.

well as the ways that environment is crucial for the operation and disruption of ideology."[46] The argument that environment can contribute, in some way, to the "disruption of ideology" is intriguing and worth analysing more closely in the context of "Inkalamu's Place." According to the symbolic framework created by the narrator, the environment disrupts ideology in the sense of destroying Inkalamu's colonial legacy. It is this interpretation, encouraged by the narrator, which is problematized in the story. Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that Gordimer does not endorse the progressive, liberal narrative presented by the narrator; on the contrary, she uses irony in order to examine it in the wider context of her narrator's behaviour.

Gordimer's ironic exploration of liberalism is at its clearest at the end of the story, when the narrator leaves Inkalamu's house and, on her way back, meets a woman who turns out to be his youngest daughter, Nonny. Nonny has indeed put the past behind her but not for ideological reasons—she simply needs to earn a living and cannot afford to dwell on the past. It is apparent that the democratic changes in the country have had little effect on her life; indeed, she hardly takes an interest in the national celebrations taking place in the capital. The narrator's attempts to draw a parallel between herself and Nonny ("We were of the new generation, she and I"[47]) are unconvincing, and the same can be said about her contention that the democratic changes have had a similar effect on each of them when it comes to their financial status (she mentions the fact that both Inkalamu and her father have lost large portions of their land following decolonization). The desire to see democratic changes in the country solely in terms of progress obscures the reality faced by Nonny and her family, most importantly the dire economic conditions in which they are forced to live. The words with which the narrator concludes her visit—"Thank God she [Nonny] was free of him, and the place he and his kind had made for her"[48]—sound like an expression of wishful thinking. Inkalamu's daughter may be free of him in the immediate, physical sense of not being subject to his wishes, but her life is shaped by a colonial legacy that the narrator fails to acknowledge. Concluding this discussion, it can be argued that the socioecological unconscious in "Inkalamu's Place" shows that reductive narratives of postcolonial development can function as a way of obscuring reality—suppressing

46 Caminero-Santangelo, *Different Shades of Green*, 121.

47 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 102.

48 Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions*, 105.

racial, social, and cultural differences to make them subject to simplified notions of democratic progress.

From the 1970s to the 2000s: Exploring Attitudes to Animals

It is sometimes overlooked that Gordimer's exploration of white consciousness—part of what she saw as her political role as a South African writer—takes place not only in the context of human relationships but also those between people and animals. While in "The Gentle Art," the suffering and death of animals remains in the background, Gordimer's stories published from the late 1970s explore the ways in which the attitude towards animals is shaped by the colonial legacy and by the destructive influence of apartheid ideology. This tendency can also be observed in Gordimer's novels. In one of the most powerful scenes in *Burger's Daughter* (1979), Rosa Burger finds herself in a Johannesburg township and is confronted with the excruciating scene of a drunken man whipping a donkey that is no longer able to serve the man and his family. Faced with this display of fury and violence, Rosa decides to remain a passive onlooker. She does not confront the drunken donkey-driver because she considers herself in a historically unviable position to do so: her thinking is that as a white woman who feels responsible for the social and political injustice in her country, she does not have the right to criticize a man who is himself a victim, not a perpetrator: "I couldn't bear to see myself–her–Rosa Burger–as one of those whites who can care more for animals than people."[49]

Commenting on this episode, J. M. Coetzee emphasizes the phrase "torture without torturer," arguing that the scene witnessed by Rosa "comes from the inner reaches of Dante's hell, beyond the scope of morality."[50] Indeed, this dramatic description points to the impossibility of moral judgment, as the man responsible for the suffering of the tortured animal is a victim himself, inflicting on the creature the violence to which he and his family have been subjected. Commenting on the same episode, Barbara Temple-Thurston writes about "dislocated suffering, suffering distilled down to its essential agony,"[51] but

49 Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (London: Penguin Books, 1980), 210.

50 J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 367.

51 Barbara Temple-Thurston, *Nadine Gordimer Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), 89.

it can also be argued that the episode is about displaced aggression. In the hell where Rosa has found herself, violence is not merely a tool employed to gain domination over the other—either human or animal—but also an overwhelming force which is no longer unambiguously governed by the logic of domination and exploitation. The man and the creature, described as one entity ("a single object"), are inextricably connected in a circle of violence against which both are helpless: the creature has no way of shirking the man's whip and the man is overcome by an uncontrollable fury, which is all but pointless. The scene from *Burger's Daughter* raises the issue of how the perception of violence against animals and the reaction to it are shaped by social and political circumstances. Especially important here are such issues as the dire material conditions of the black population (in the case of the man) and the frustration and helplessness of Rosa, who is torn between her outrage at the suffering of the animal and her guilt connected with being part of the racial group responsible for the injustices of apartheid.

The problem of representing violence against animals—and responding to it—is also explored in "**A Hunting Accident**"[52] (*Encounter* (48.3), 1977; *A Soldier's Embrace*, 1980). The plot of the story revolves around a hunting trip organized by Ratau, an educated and urbane son of a tribal chief who regularly entertains his friends by organising hunting expeditions into the territory of his tribe. One of his regular guests is a young woman, Christine, the daughter of a colonial official, who decides to give her new lover—a famous photographer—a treat by taking him along with her, hoping that he will enjoy the atmosphere of constant fiesta in Ratau's household. Educated in a "progressive school,"[53] Christine treats Ratau with warm-hearted mockery, but she is also attracted to his assertive masculinity, which is tangible in his passion for hunting. Behind this attitude is the conviction that while hunting is certainly not

52 The story was inspired by Gordimer's journey to Botswana, during which she met Sekgoma Khama, the cousin of Seretse Khama, the President of Botswana in the years 1966-1980. Gordimer met Sekgoma Khama in the village of Serowe, where Khama took her and other visitors on a hunting expedition, in the course of which the eponymous "hunting accident" happened: as they were driving in pursuit of an eland, a gun accidentally went off, almost killing one of the hunters. The expedition—and the entire journey—is described by Gordimer in an article titled "Pula," originally published in *London Magazine* in 1973 (the original typescript dates back to 1970) and reprinted in *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics & Places*.

53 Nadine Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace* (New York: The Viking Press, 1980), 58.

an activity to be performed by progressive liberals, it can be enjoyed in the spirit of the carnival.

Ratau's possessive attitude towards the land is apparent in all of his actions, from his driving habits to his attitude towards animals. Despite being an experienced hunter, he has no qualms about allowing one of his guests to shoot an African antelope doe.[54] The guest misses and only succeeds in mutilating the animal. As we learn, the mutilated antelope

> stood perfectly steady on three legs with the fourth, left hind, dangling snapped at the joint. There was only this disarticulation and a string of bright red blood to break the symmetry of the creature.[55]

This detailed description of the immobile doe, awaiting its death at the hands of the hunters, has a photographic quality to it, as if—for that split second—the narrative was focalized by the photographer, eager to capture this poignant moment in the animal's unequal struggle with the humans. There is a cruel beauty in this picture of a strong, muscular creature, poised on the edge of a field, as if it was ready to flee its hunters at any time, yet incapacitated by them and left to their mercy.

The description of the wounded doe leads to a brutal and naturalistic scene in which the inexperienced hunter—"sweating, almost giggling with shame and rage at himself"[56]—approaches the dying animal and tries to put it out of its agony. Standing above the animal in a gesture of total domination, the man once again aims at his victim, missing his shot, so that the hunters, already embarrassed and uneasy at this display of incompetence and needless suffering,

54 In the mentioned article „Pula" (1973), Gordimer writes about a conflict between the government of Botswana, with its emphasis on the preservation of wildlife, and what she calls "the curious unconscious alliance of interest between the Africans who've shot for the pot and whites who have shot for trophies and fur coats." Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, ed. Stephen Clingman (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 203. She points to the thriving fur and taxidermy business with an irony that conveys her criticism of the hypocritical attitude of Western visitors to Botswana. (She is unconvinced by the argument that the hunting business is beneficial for the region because it grants economic self-sufficiency to the indigenous tribes; while she does not state this openly, the suggestion is that this explanation only serves to mask the exploitative attitude of Western hunters and collectors).

55 Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, 64.

56 Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, 64.

are confronted with the blunt fact of the creature's agony, expressed in its last cry, "the familiar and gentle, pitiful moo of any clumsy dairy mother."[57] The excitement of the hunt is suddenly, if only momentarily, broken, as the hunted animal ceases to be merely a target and a trophy, becoming instead a living—and dying—being, which, in its awareness of suffering and impending death, bears a disconcerting resemblance to a human.

Looking on from a distance, Christine is made uncomfortable not by the suffering of the animal but by the fact that her lover probably condemns this display of pointless violence. She is taken by surprise, when, instead of averting his eyes from the scene, the photographer takes his camera and begins to photograph the dying animal:

> He went straight up to the beast and, down on one knee, began to photograph it again and again, close-up, gazing through the camera, with the camera, into the last moments of life passing in its open eyes. His face was absolutely intent on the techniques he was employing . . . He placed filters over his lens, removed them. He took his time.[58]

The scene in which the photographer confronts the animal in agony, trying to capture its suffering, seems to be yet another display of mercilessness—an interpretation which is made all the more likely by Christine's earlier, jocular claim that the photographer does not use guns but "shoot[s] with his camera."[59] Nonetheless, the fact that he refers to the animal with the personal pronoun "she" (his response to Christine's impersonal statement "It's still moving" is "She's gone"[60]) undermines this interpretation, as does the fact that the next day the lover abandons Christine without a word. His decision to record the last moments of the animal can be viewed as an act of witnessing its death as well as the cruelty of the people who killed it. If this is indeed an act of witnessing, driven by the imperative not to turn one's eyes away from the sight of suffering, then it is an ambiguous one, since the passage emphasizes the photographer's concentration on his work, thus pointing to the absence of a more humane reaction.

57 Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, 64.

58 Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, 65.

59 Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, 58.

60 Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace*, 65.

The socioecological critique in Gordimer's stories is effective when it points to the failure of the protagonists to acknowledge issues that may be evident to the readers. In the case of the stories analysed above, the female protagonists fail to notice that their understanding of nature, as well as their approach towards animals, is essentially colonial and that this consequently puts them in the position of the aggressor. The tendency to project colonial attitudes onto nature is also present in one of Gordimer's most interesting and enigmatic stories, "**Spoils**" (*Granta* 22, 1987; *Jump*, 1991). "Spoils" is about the relationship between the human and the animal world. It is one of few stories in which Gordimer addresses the topic of vegetarianism, if only in passing. The story is ambiguous and difficult to interpret, mostly because of the male narrator's inability (or unwillingness) to verbalize his feelings clearly. What does remain clear is the man's acute sensitivity to human suffering, as well as his sense of disenchantment with the world, which leads him to a state of disillusioned resignation.

The central question asked by the narrator of "Spoils"—"Which is it I choose to be no part of"[61]—concerns his detachment, or, to be more precise, his form of protest against the chaotic nature of the world, where death is dealt out haphazardly and "*senselessly*"[62] (a word which is also emphasized in the narrative), with no reason or logic. The question refers both to the violence of apartheid South Africa and to the unexpected and tragic accidents that take place every day. With the awareness that he has no alternative but to be part of this world, the man resigns himself to an ironic stance, by means of which he tries to emphasize his detachment from the middle-class values so readily accepted and enjoyed by his wife and his friends. What is important in the context of the present discussion is that the man's critical stance often takes as its object other characters' attitudes towards nature. The group of which the man is a reluctant part includes city dwellers whose "love of the wild"[63] is confined to participating in a safari and then enjoying an evening around a barbecue prepared by an African servant. For the man, this scene is "a parody of old colonial times,"[64] in which the white people are gathered in a closed circle, in proximity to nature yet safely isolated from its potential dangers. The scene is a reference

61 Nadine Gordimer, *Jump and Other Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 161.

62 Gordimer, *Jump*, 162.

63 Gordimer, *Jump*, 163.

64 Gordimer, *Jump*, 164.

to a thoroughly colonial conception of Africa, "defined by its embodiment of timeless and dangerous, if awe-inspiring, wilderness."[65] Guided by this notion, the white people enjoy the self-deceiving illusion of being part of nature while at the same time separating themselves from it (with "the stockade against the wild beasts"[66]) and enjoying the food (described as "charred flesh,"[67] "burning fat,"[68] and "gnawed bones"[69]) prepared by their servants.

This bogus, neocolonial stance with respect to nature is the subject of the parallels that the protagonist draws between the human and the animal world. One example of such surprising parallels is when he observes a pack of lions feasting on a zebra: he calls it "another gathering,"[70] referring ironically to the barbecue parties attended by him and his friends. The awe with which his wife reacts to the sight of the lions tearing through the carcass of the zebra (she uses only one word: "Unreal"[71]) is criticised by him as stereotypical, but—and this is the important part—the man's response to it is informed by a similar impulse to romanticize wilderness:

> No. Real. *Real.* Alone, he can keep it intact, exactly that: the stasis, the existence without time and without time there is no connection, the state in which he really need have, has no part, could have no part, there in the eyes of the lionesses. Between the beasts and the human load, the void.[72]

The man shows a strong inclination to dehistoricize the animal world: as he puts it, "the beasts have no time, it will be measured by their fill."[73] The fact that he refers to "beasts" rather than animals is significant insofar as it shows his desire to mythologize wilderness, viewing it in contrast to civilization. According to this conception, while life in wilderness is ahistoric since time is

65 Caminero-Santangelo, *Different Shades of Green*, 16.

66 Gordimer, *Jump*, 164.

67 Gordimer, *Jump*, 164.

68 Gordimer, *Jump*, 165.

69 Gordimer, *Jump*, 165.

70 Gordimer, *Jump*, 169.

71 Gordimer, *Jump*, 173.

72 Gordimer, *Jump*, 173.

73 Gordimer, *Jump*, 172.

entirely subjective, dictated primarily by the needs of the body ("measured by their fill"), to live in civilization means to be dependent on the movements of history; in other words, to be dependent on time. "The void" dividing the human and the animal world is solely the man's construct, expressive of his frustrated but never quite abandoned need to escape civilization and search for a place outside of history—a sufficiently conventional postcolonial fantasy for a white intellectual to enjoy.

The awareness of the gap dividing contemporary man from nature is based on the contention that wilderness is outside of history and civilization—as such, it is governed by harmony, logic, and self-sufficiency. This latter reflection is provoked by the man's contemplation of the intricate work of the dung beetles and other insects that sustain themselves on other animals' waste: "That's life. If every beetle has its place, how is refusal possible. And if refusal is possible, what place is there."[74] If the order of the natural world, to which individuals belong by virtue of the role they play in it, has a place for humans then it is only for people like Siza—the African who is serving his guests during their weekend stay. Siza's spontaneous decision to carve a piece of meat from the dead zebra that the lions killed is a gesture that clearly separates him from the gathering of his white guests (it is characteristic that while performing this task, he is not referred to by his name but called simply "a black man," as if in the eyes of the onlookers, his skin colour was a token of his special relationship with nature). Also, the spatial arrangement of the people during this scene—Siza standing over the slaughtered zebra, while the white spectators observe him at a distance—emphasizes his symbolic inclusion into the natural order. The fact that Siza is careful to pack his piece of meat in a sheet of newspaper so as not to soil his guests with the blood dripping from it ("he knows he mustn't let it drip blood on the white people"[75]) can be read as a commentary on the reaction of his guests: it is as if they were afraid that any possible contact with blood would be part of some mysterious initiation, threatening to undermine their position as observers.

"Spoils"—a reference to Siza's 'prize'—is based on a double irony which targets the socioecological unconscious of its white protagonists and, most importantly, the central character. Despite his criticism of colonial attitudes towards nature, he is unable to transcend the nature-culture dichotomy and the

74 Gordimer, *Jump*, 177.

75 Gordimer, *Jump*, 179.

resultant impulse to mythologize nature. Doing so, he falls prey to the same tendency that he mocks in other people, failing to see that the sense of separation from the natural world is ideologically conditioned and perpetuated both by him and his friends.

In "Spoils" Gordimer shows that the white people's alienation from nature, inherent in their mythologizing impulse, stems from their inability to transcend exploitative attitudes towards the natural world, inherited from their forefathers. This colonial legacy is also explored in "**Teraloyna**" (*The Boston Globe*, 31 May 1987; *COSAW Journal* (1), 1988; *Jump*, 1991), which tells the story of the forced immigration and dissolution of the eponymous fictional tribe (the name can be translated as "the far earth"), followed by the symbolic return of one of its members. The story of the Teraloyna's stay on the island and the subsequent emigration of its members to countries in America, Australia, and Africa is interwoven with the story of the animal life on this island. The first-person narrator—an unnamed member of the tribe—reveals that their island was dominated by goats, who ate much of its vegetation and subsequently died of starvation. After being returned to its previous state of lavish vegetation, another animal came to dominate on the island, as cats, brought by the scientists working there, multiplied rapidly, spreading throughout the area and endangering other inhabitants. Faced with the humiliating problem of compromising the ecological balance of the island, the scientists arrange for soldiers from the South African army to shoot the cats—a solution which they consider the most effective of all (earlier, they tried poisoning the cats and infecting them with flu). One of the soldiers appointed to carry out this grim task is a descendant of the Teraloyna tribe.

"Teraloyna" has been interpreted as "an allegory of imperialism"[76] and a commentary on the absurd nature of racial discrimination. While the postcolonial dimension of the story is an important one—especially in the description of the tribe's gradual acculturation in racist South Africa—the environmental context is just as significant. My claim is that "Teraloyna" can also be viewed as an analysis of people's changing relationship with the natural environment in the context of the violence that escalated in South Africa in the 1980s. Both those

76 Karen Lazar, "Jump and Other Stories: Gordimer's Leap into the 1990s: Gender and Politics in Her Latest Short Fiction," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18, no. 4 (December 1992): 794, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2637104.

topics—distinct but closely interwoven in Gordimer's story—can be fruitfully discussed using the notion of the socioecological unconscious.

First of all, it is worthwhile to note that both the goats' and then the cats' periods of domination over the island are brought about entirely by accident, but while the goats' presence on it is somewhat mysterious (the narrator conjectures that they were probably brought on one of the ships that visited the island), the proliferation of cats—first domesticated and then wild—stems entirely from human error of judgment (one of its visitors—a member of a team of meteorologists conducting research on the island—took with himself a pair of cats without predicting the possible consequences). The mistake is described in an overtly ironic mode of explication: as we are told, nobody could have predicted "such fierce fecundity"[77] on the part of the cats. The conclusion underscores the incompetence of the people whose preconceptions about the natural environment may have been sound in the context of their home but totally unworkable, and even absurd, in their new surroundings. Incompetence and arrogance are at the centre of this critique.

The scientists' incompetence is visible in their decision to rid the island entirely of the cat population by enlisting the soldiers to exterminate the cats. In this project of restoring balance to the island's wildlife, the scientists are guided by the distinction into indigenous and non-indigenous animals—a contrast that is problematized in the story, taking into account the dynamic changes in the island's ecosystem (as illustrated by the story about the goats that once inhabited the island). Significantly, the scientists fail to consider the effect that their actions will have on the ecosystem of the island (for example, the inevitable rapid growth of the population of mice, which the wild cats kept in check). Most importantly, what the scientists overlook is the ethical aspect of this total extermination. This argument brings us to the socioecological unconscious in the story, which points to the scientists' failure to acknowledge that by planning to purify the island of its 'non-indigenous' inhabitants, they implicate themselves in the history of violence and oppression. As it is revealed in the story, the recruit soldiers have already acquired some experience in shooting at people, which they will put to use on the island; no doubt, the practice of shooting the wild cats will make them more effective back in the country, in the armed confrontations with the civilian population. Gordimer draws a direct parallel between the violence directed against animals and that

77 Gordimer, *Jump*, 105.

aimed at people; this analogy becomes clear in the last sentence of the story, which could have been uttered both by the scientists and by military leaders: "All colours, abundant targets, doesn't matter which, kill, kill them all."[78] Both the people and the animals are to be killed indiscriminately since they are presented as a serious danger to the precarious political/ecological balance of their respective environments.

The juxtaposition of the mass killing of animals and people shows that the same pattern is at work in both cases: it is the logic of genocide in which murder is presented as an act of purifying ('setting straight') the order that was once at risk. This logic can be explored in the context of Zygmunt Bauman's definition of genocide as "an exercise in rational social engineering"[79] rather than as a spontaneous outburst of irrational emotions. Bauman is relevant in the context of the present discussion since his main argument is that the struggle for order, a characteristic of modernity, brought disastrous consequences both to the natural world and to society. As Bauman argues, the project of modernity originated from modern science, which saw nature as inherently malleable, to be brought under man's control: "Nature came to mean something to be subordinated to human will and reason—a passive object of purposeful action."[80] This attitude of domination then came to permeate social life, as a result of which the criteria of order and usefulness began to be applied to people (such as alcoholics and the mentally ill, as well as people of a different culture and race) who were considered out of place in the given vision of society.

The need for order, where order means the subjection of the individual to a larger social (or environmental) vision, and the preference for swift and efficient solutions, even if they are inhumane, are the targets of irony in "Teraloyna," which is both verbal (such as when the narrator argues that "If the hunters are good marksmen the death will be far quicker and less painful than death by arsenic or cat flu"[81]) and structural in that it is based on the circular logic of the story. As mentioned, the story concludes with the arrival on the island of a descendant of the Teraloyna tribe, namely, a young recruit in the South African army. This fact may be viewed as an ironic commentary on the notion of social progress, measured according to the criteria that Bauman enumerated.

78 Gordimer, *Jump*, 107

79 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 38.

80 Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, 39.

81 Gordimer, *Jump*, 106.

As we learn at the beginning of the story, the Teraloyna tribe was forced to leave the island due to it being overrun with goats; now the balance of power is on the side of the humans, who, despite being smaller in number, can resort to methods that will put them in a position of domination. The fact that this mass murder—what Karen Lazar has aptly called "metaphoric genocide"[82]—is seen primarily as a necessary means of the recovery of order (in this case, ecological balance) is proof of how deep the anthropocentric vision of the protagonists is rooted in their mentality.

The mass killing of people and animals is a topic that also recurs in "**Karma**," a mini-cycle of six, loosely connected stories, first published together in *Loot* (2003). Of special interest here is the fifth and final story in "Karma," which, as with the other parts of this cycle, addresses the individual's involvement in history and the way in which history shapes—often subconsciously—the thoughts and actions of the people described.[83] The story in question is divided into two parts: the first is set in Russia during the Second World War (either during the siege of Moscow or Stalingrad) and is narrated by a 14-year-old boy, Kostya, who, together with his father, is imprisoned by the Nazis and later executed. The bravery and resilience of the boy are emphasized by the fact that despite his imprisonment and intuitions of an imminent end, he is convinced that the enemy will soon be defeated. His last words—uttered when he is removed from his cell—are: "Taking me away to be shot. The bars still there on my eyes."[84]

The second part of the story is focalized by a thirty-year-old Russian woman, whose family falls prey to the political and economic transformations sweeping Russia in the 1990s. Reduced to poverty, the woman accepts the proposal of her lover to emigrate to Italy, where she marries his cousin in the hope of finding sustenance for herself and her family in Russia. Her illusions of having found a stable married life are soon broken, when her husband, a successful businessman who has built his wealth on a chain of butcher stores, takes his pregnant wife on a tour of his farm to admire the efficiency with which he runs his business. As the woman enters one of the hangars in which the cows are kept, she finds herself in a crowded anteroom to an abattoir:

82 Lazar, "Jump and Other Stories: Gordimer's Leap into the 1990s," 795.

83 For a detailed discussion of this cycle of stories see also Chapter Three and Chapter Six.

84 Nadine Gordimer, *Loot and Other Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 214.

> In the hangars are five hundred beasts. . . . They are chained by the leg. The bulk of each animal is contained—just—by the iron bars of a heavy stall; it cannot turn around. It can only eat, at this end of its body. Eat, eat. The butcher owner tells her: at six months, ready for slaughter. Prime.[85]

Gordimer's description of a farm in which the only priorities are the cutting of expenditure and the maximization of profit is reminiscent of Peter Singer's description of modern farms: "Farming is competitive and the methods adopted are those that cut costs and increase production. So farming is now 'factory farming.' Animals are treated like machines that convert low-priced fodder into high-priced flesh, and any innovation will be used if it results in a cheaper 'conversion ratio.'"[86] The cruelly exploitative logic of those profit-driven practices of farming is based on a simple, but effective and widespreaind of socioecological unconscious created by the capitalist economics. Gordimer exposes this logic in the quoted passage, as she interweaves the description of the animals with the farmer's running commentary, showing the instrumental treatment of his stock. The cows are not animals—they are "beasts," who are viewed only from the perspective of their market value (the "prime" quality of their meat). Gordimer points to the inhumane cruelty, hidden behind the principle of efficiency, which has become so overpowering that it has effectively eclipsed all moral and ethical considerations.

Seeing the inhuman conditions of unbroken confinement in which the cows are kept, the wife of the butcher experiences a panic attack, during which she imagines herself to be incarcerated: "She is swollen with such horror, her body feels the iron bars enclosing her, . . . she cannot turn about, escape to the house."[87] The sudden awareness of "a real memory she couldn't have had"[88] is a reference to the first part of the story, in which the boy Kostya, led by his executioners out into the yard, describes the bars of his cell: they are one of the last images in his life. Read in the context of the previous stories in "Karma," the woman's sudden flash of memory can be interpreted as a glimpse into a previous reincarnation—an earlier life that the soul lived in the course of its karmic cycle—but what is more interesting is the connection between those two

85 Gordimer, *Loot*, 230.

86 Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 97.

87 Gordimer, *Loot*, 231.

88 Gordimer, *Loot*, 231.

episodes that juxtaposes the crimes of the Nazis, carried out in the seclusion of prisons and concentration camps, and the mass murder of animals, conducted in the enclosed spaces of the hangars and the abattoirs. The link between the violence of the Nazi oppressors and that of the butcher-businessman is based on the logic of domination: racial and national domination in the former case and the man-animal domination connected with the profit-driven capitalist system in the latter. The woman's helplessness at being part of this mechanism of oppression is clear from her decision to abort her baby: it is as if she was unable to find a way out of this entrapment but did not want her child to come into this horrific inheritance.

The Late 1990s and the 2000s: Fables for Our Times

One shared feature of the stories collected in Gordimer's two post-apartheid volumes is their geographical disparity: unlike the previous collections, *Loot* (2003) and *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black* (2007) take its readers to various countries in both northern and southern hemispheres: from South Africa and Chile to Italy, England, and Germany. In this sense, Gordimer's stories, unlike the novels written at the time, can be described as more global in their scope. "Karma," discussed in the previous section and in Chapter Two, is an especially interesting example of this tendency insofar as this cycle of stories traces connections between individuals not only across spatial but also temporal barriers.

Gordimer's interest in the global is reflected in the lectures and essays that she published in the 1990s. In "When Art Meets Politics" (1999), she addressed the issue of the writers' inescapable embeddedness in politics, not only national but also global: "the flux and reflux of the globalization we are beginning to live through."[89] Gordimer's interest in globalisation was closely connected with her insistence on social justice. In "A Letter to Future Generations" (1999), she argued that while globalization had had unquestionable significance for the world of finance, the real question was whether this tendency would contribute to the narrowing of the economic gap between the rich and the poor. She went on to claim that rampant consumption, enabled by globalization, had had no such effect so far in that it had "in some aspects undermined the truly human prospects for globalisation: sustainable development for all."[90]

89 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 550.

90 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 553.

Gordimer's criticism of what she referred to as "runaway consumption,"[91] with its steady erosion of renewable resources, is also present in her later works, including the first and eponymous story of her eleventh, penultimate collection. "**Loot**" (*The New Yorker*, 22 March 1999; *Loot*, 2003) was written in the autumn of 1998, after Gordimer's visit to Chile. As she writes to her *New Yorker* editor at the time,[92] she was inspired by the stories the inhabitants of Valdivia told her about the earthquake that struck this region in 1960. The most powerful in recorded history, the Valdivia earthquake killed more than 1,600 people, injuring 3,000 and leaving damage amounting to almost $5 billion.

What defines "Loot" is constant interplay between the general and the particular, the collective and the individual. This principle is visible as early as in the first sentence, which both introduces and undermines the mode of the fable: "Once upon our time, there was an earthquake: but this one is the most powerful ever recorded since the invention of the Richter scale made it possible for us to measure apocalyptic warnings."[93] The interesting construction of the sentence takes the reader by surprise since it disrupts the general and fantastic mode of the fable by incorporating details which force us to attend to the event described—an event that did not take place in a fairy-tale reality but in the world and the times that are our own. What follows is a story about the sea, which, in consequence of a major earthquake, has withdrawn, revealing objects of value and thus motivating the looters to explore its bed. As the people scour through the mud for valuable things, the sea returns, bringing death and destruction. Gordimer introduces a contrast between the superficial media reports of this event and the in-depth view offered by literature. For Gordimer, it is "the sea-change of the imagination"[94] that enables the writer to convey that which is missed by the television, radio, and newspapers: the individual aspect of this tragedy.

It is worth adding that imagination, understood as a creative faculty that enables the writer to explore what lies under the surface of factual reports, is also discussed by Gordimer in her non-fiction texts. In one of her last essays on writing, "Witness: The Inward Testimony" (2006), she defines the writer's

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91 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 553.

92 Nadine Gordimer to David Remnick, 31 December 1998. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Gordimer submitted "Loot" together with this letter.

93 Gordimer, *Loot*, 3.

94 Gordimer, *Loot*, 4.

role as "a seeing of what is really taking place."[95] It is this commentary that may help to explain the enigmatic phrase used by Gordimer in "Loot": "the sea-change of the imagination."[96] In Gordimer's conception of writing, imagination is crucial insofar as it achieves "the transformation of events, motives, emotions, reactions, from the immediacy into the enduring significance that is meaning."[97] This creative transformation implies a reworking of individual experience in the context of wider socio-political events.

"Loot" has been interpreted as an ironic commentary on human greed; this interpretation was encouraged by Gordimer herself, who in an interview with Hermione Lee observed: "Maybe it is more of a political fable, about material things and possessions, the loss of possessions as well as the desire for things."[98] Adopting this interpretation, Szczurek points to the significance of the objects exposed by the sea (artefacts of war, religion, art, politics, history, etc.) and adds that the human remains revealed by the sea are a reference to the victims of apartheid, including the prisoners on Robben Island. This political interpretation is compelling in the light of the reference to Act I Scene II of *The Tempest* made at the end of the story. The phrase "full fathom five"[99]—a fragment of Ariel's song addressed to Ferdinand to mislead him that his father has been drowned—concludes the story, emphasizing the point that the victims of the regime, once buried in the depths of the ocean, have now been uncovered as a result of a political seismic shift.

Interpreting "Loot" as a political fable and as a self-reflexive commentary on the role of the writer as a witness is entirely justified in the context of the whole collection, as well as the stories in Gordimer's other volumes (the story, in its ironic 'didactic' tone, is highly reminiscent of "Once Upon a Time," published in *Jump*). These interpretations, however, do not exhaust the creative potential of "Loot," since it can also be viewed as a parable of man's relationship with nature. As we read in the story, the sudden withdrawal of the sea brings about carnivalesque joy and enthusiasm originating in the sense that the new circumstances have given people the chance to reverse the relationship

95 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 688.

96 Gordimer, *Loot*, 4.

97 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 688.

98 Qtd. in Karina Magdalena Szczurek, *Truer Than Fiction: Nadine Gordimer Writing Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Berlin: Südwestdeutscher Verlag für Hochschulschriften, 2008), 318.

99 Gordimer, *Loot*, 6.

of power between themselves and nature: "This was more than profiting by happenstance, it was robbing the power of nature before which they had fled helpless."[100] The acquisitive frenzy is rooted not only in the people's greed but also in their illusion of a newly acquired power over nature, which is dramatically contested when the sea returns to its place, drowning the looters under its waves. Read in this way, the environmental unconscious in "Loot" points to the protagonists' exploitative attitude to nature, built on the illusory sense of control over it.

Gordimer's politically and environmentally focused stories show that human domination over the environment often has at its source the illusory sense of separateness from it; in other words, the false contention that it is possible to reap benefits from nature while at the same time remain unaffected by the consequences of one's exploitative actions. Another story which includes a critique of this erroneous sense of insularity is "**An Emissary**" (*Loot*, 2003). The titular emissary is a malaria-carrying mosquito known as *Anopheles* (in full *Anopheles gambiae*), a Greek name whose literal translation is "useless," or, more precisely, "not bringing profit." Anopheles may be an emissary of death ("the Reaper with the scythe,"[101] as it is described in the story), but, more importantly, it is an emissary *from* the countries attacked by malaria. Ileana Dimitriu comments that malaria functions as "a unifying metaphor meant to bring the north and the south together in one story."[102] As such, adds Dimitriu, "the metaphor of infectious transmission" illustrates the fact that "the rich north and the poor south are, in the new global order, inextricably linked."[103] The "inextricable link" is in this case made possible by the availability of air travel: as we learn from the passage quoted at the beginning of the story, malaria-carrying mosquitoes "can even stow away on international flights."[104]

"An Emissary" is, as Ileana Dimitriu rightly points out, an illustration of the close connection between affluent and developing countries, but, equally

100 Gordimer, *Loot*, 4.

101 Gordimer, *Loot*, 149.

102 Ileana Dimitriu, "Shifts in Gordimer's Recent Short Fiction: Story-Telling after Apartheid," *Current Writing* 17, no. 1 (2005): 99.

103 Dimitriu, "Shifts in Gordimer's Recent Short Fiction," 99.

104 Gordimer, *Loot*, 143. Gordimer quoted this statement from Claire Panosian Dunavan's review of *The Fever* by Mark Honigsbaum. See: Claire Panosian Dunavan, "Catch as Catch Can," *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, May 12, 2002.

importantly, it is also an ironic critique of Western insularity. Since the grave consequences of this mindset (strengthened by capitalism and market economy) are only present on the edges of people's vision, this illusory sense of separateness from nature can be considered as an example of the socioecological unconscious. It is significant that in all four of the situations described in the story—a relaxing spell in a sauna, a concert of classical music, a passionate meeting of two lovers, a drug-fuelled party—the participants are all in thrall of their emotions and, consequently, entirely oblivious of those elements of reality that do not constitute part of their experience. The presence of the mosquito either remains unnoticed or, when it manifests itself in the form of a bite, it is treated as entirely negligible ("so small, nothing"[105]). The reactions of the nameless characters in Gordimer's story illustrate a mindset according to which problems may exist, but they are not consequential enough to be meaningfully addressed. It is both fitting and deeply ironic that an issue considered geographically distant enough to be overlooked manifests itself in the form of a being that can well be ignored but whose actions have consequences that cannot be brushed aside.

The Late 1990s and the 2000s: Poverty and Environmental Issues

As I mentioned in the previous section, Gordimer's concern for the natural environment was part of her larger socio-political vision. In her non-fiction writing, she pointed to the exploitation of natural resources in the context of socio-political inequality and the "slow violence"[106] done to the people in developing countries. One example of this tendency can be found in the lecture "The Poor Are Always With Us" (1997), in which she enumerated several causes of this global problem, among them unequal development between affluent and developing countries, war, and, most importantly here, natural disasters, which she called "the violence of nature." Gordimer drew a link between ecological issues, such as the destruction of indigenous rain forests and the pollution of

105 Gordimer, *Loot*, 148.

106 "By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all." Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

the oceans, with the worldwide problem of poverty: "The violence perpetrated *by* humankind *on* nature is increasingly one of the causes of poverty."[107] Her argument was that the violence done *to* nature by the inhabitants of affluent parts of the planet directly leads to the violence *of* nature against people living in developing countries. Gordimer emphasized the connection between the exploitation of the natural environment and the problem of poverty. Her main argument was that unless these ecological issues are adequately addressed, poverty will remain a pressing concern.

The citizens of developing countries are also the subject of Gordimer's lecture titled "Thirst," given at the *World Water Forum* in Kyoto in 2003. In the lecture, Gordimer addressed the issue of the scarcity of potable water in the countries struggling with the problem of widespread poverty. According to Gordimer, the reckless consumption of drinking water (what she called the affluent countries' "colossal binge"), exacerbated by the changing climate and the exploitative attitude to natural resources, has led to severely limited access to drinking water for the impoverished, resulting in numerous diseases which can be attributed to poor sanitation. At the centre of the lecture are the gender-related consequences of restricted access to potable water: the fact that women in developing countries are often forced to carry it over long distances. Gordimer emphasized what was, no doubt, reiterated also by other participants of the Forum—namely, the fact that while the scarcity of drinking water affects underdeveloped countries in particular, it is a global problem and should be considered as such.

The exploration of the close connection between poverty and environmental problems is not only confined to Gordimer's non-fiction but can also be found in her stories, including "**Mission Statement**" (*Loot*, 2003), in which she devotes much of her attention to a detailed description of her protagonists' attitude towards nature and, specifically, the land. In one of the key episodes of the story, Gladwell Shadrack Chabruma, the Deputy-Director-General of the Ministry of Land Affairs, takes Roberta Blayne, assistant to the director of an American aid organization, on a trip to the countryside. When Roberta learns that they are headed to the farm that belongs to Gladwell's uncle, she asks about their sustenance, only to learn that the people there "can't cultivate"[108] and are consequently entirely dependent on the money sent by their children. It turns

107 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 537.

108 Gordimer, *Loot*, 26.

out that the absence of farming in the area stems from the presence of land mines—the remnants of a civil conflict that once tore the country apart—which makes it highly dangerous to plough and sow the fields. The local population is thus cut off from their land, incapable of sustaining themselves by farming and unable to move further than the perimeters of their houses. Their forced inactivity, resulting in their effective confinement to their homes, makes them resemble prisoners, resigned to their fate and totally dependent on their children and on the charity of people like Gladwell.

Gordimer describes not only the desecration of the land by the landmines but also the characters' attitudes towards this fact. It is a significant detail that Gladwell only tells Roberta the reason for the absence of farming in the area when she announces to him her intentions of exploring the farm: it is as if he was either reluctant to reveal this fact (perhaps because it did not quite fit the idea of a pleasant weekend's outing) or unable to see the significance of this subject—an instance of the socioecological unconscious—both of which possibilities are highly surprising taking into account the fact that it is his own family that is plagued by this problem (by contrast, Gladwell's farm—his "*maison secondaire*,"[109] as Roberta calls it—is safe both to explore and to cultivate). The problem of the landmines only raises a slight interest in Roberta's superior, who is more preoccupied with the plans of the American investors to introduce IT into the local schools. Evidently, the problem fits neither Gladwell's agenda nor that of the American aid organization.

Gordimer's socioecological critique can be described as being systemic in that it addresses the failures of the various institutions to deal with the problems they are facing, but, at the same time, it is so deep in its analysis that it locates the problems in her protagonists' mentality. In "Mission Statement," she is openly critical of Gladwell, whose 'considerate' gesture of giving his impoverished relatives a bag of groceries is hardly what one would expect from an increasingly influential politician. Gladwell's indifference to the fate of his relatives is part of Gordimer's wider critique of politicians who do not address the pressing social and ecological problems of their countries, yet spend enough time and money creating a zone of safety and comfort for themselves.

Like Mehring in *The Conservationist*, Gladwell treats his farm both as a refuge and a status symbol. His expectations towards the farm are purely consumerist in that he expects his money to solve the problems with a minimum

109 Gordimer, *Loot*, 47.

of effort. He sees the farm, with its workers and servants, as a self-sustaining mechanism created primarily for his and his guests' pleasure. Roberta certainly draws both pleasure and enthusiasm from her visits to the farm, which become more frequent as Gladwell becomes her lover. When their relationship draws to an end, she realizes that it is the farm that she will miss the most: "It was as if no-one had ever owned it before, because attachment, love for a place, is like love for a human being, it brings that place, that person, to heightened life."[110] Roberta's fascination with the ahistoricity of the farm—the fact that it seems a place apart from the rest of the country—is characteristic of a more general desire to cut herself off from pre-colonial and colonial history in an attempt to lead a life free of the obligations of tradition and ritual. This desire is symbolically represented by her horse ride across Gladwell's farm, which gives her the feelings of freedom and enthusiasm, as well as the sense of attachment to the farm. Nevertheless, it is significant that Roberta never stops to talk with the workers—she simply waves to them as she goes, drawing pleasure from the illusory conviction that she is part of a larger whole.

The 2000s: Writing in the Apocalyptic Mode

Towards the end of this chapter, it is worth mentioning one of Gordimer's last stories, which is certainly environmentally focused—perhaps even to a greater degree than the ones discussed earlier—but is also unlike the previous works in its adoption of a striking (for Gordimer) narrative mode. In "**Second Coming**" (*Southwest Review*, vol. 94, No. 4, 2009; *Life Times: Stories, 1952–2007*, 2010), Gordimer addresses environmental matters in an apocalyptic narrative. The story takes the theme of the Christian *parousia*—the eponymous "second coming" of the Saviour—as its basis for exploring people's destructive influence on the world. Gordimer subverts the Biblical accounts (especially Matthew 24: 30–31), which present *parousia* as the arrival of a powerful judge, assisted by terrifying natural phenomena and preceded by various cataclysms (the Olivet Discourse in Luke 21: 7–38 mentions war, earthquakes, famines, and pestilence). In Gordimer's story, the major catastrophe that has extinguished all life on earth is not a *manifestation* of the end of time—it *is* the end of time since there is no one left to be saved or condemned. Moreover, it is beyond any transcendental control; the Saviour (referred to as "he" throughout the story) is as ignorant of its

110 Gordimer, *Loot*, 58.

causes as is, no doubt, the reader; in fact, it seems as if the silent *parousia* in the story was a side-effect of the major destruction wrought by man.

Images of destruction, related from the perspective of the unlikely guest, concern both the natural world (e.g., we learn about "Dead trees, as beggar figures arrested against the line of sky"[111]) and the works of man. Destroyed cities, full of buildings once expressive of humankind's pride, are now the new pollution of the earth and man's "desecrated heritage."[112] The vain search for "fields of grain"[113] proves that the earth was not cultivated but dominated by man. The hope that life will be reborn on those fields of destruction is painfully frustrated by the discovery that the water is contaminated, putrid, and lifeless, offering no further prospect of life. The last sentence—"The sea is dead"[114]—is an unsettling conclusion, also taking into account the fact that this was one of the last stories that Gordimer wrote.

"Second Coming" is one of Gordimer's least nuanced stories and this is probably what makes it so problematic. There is no irony to distance the narrator's stance from that of the author: clearly Gordimer, a declared atheist, nevertheless decided to adopt Christian eschatology to frame her grim prophecies for the world. The question of why Gordimer should opt for such an unlikely mouthpiece for her message about the planet cannot be answered in any conclusive way. It is a convenient choice in that it allowed for a striking reversal of theme, in which the end of the world is brought about not by unearthly powers but by man alone. Nevertheless, one wonders whether the choice of theme, together with its unsophisticated narrative strategy, did not come at too high a cost. The dramatic words of the protagonist ("O Lord have you forsaken them?"[115]) do little to emphasize the problem and only succeed in undermining the credibility of the narrative with jarring, high rhetoric.[116] Furthermore, the story would certainly have been better off without the final scene, in which the Saviour considers changing his stance from creationism to Darwinism in

111 Nadine Gordimer, *Life Times: Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 547.

112 Gordimer, *Life Times*, 547.

113 Gordimer, *Life Times*, 547.

114 Gordimer, *Life Times*, 549.

115 Gordimer, *Life Times*, 548.

116 Pertinent here is Greg Garrard's critique of apocalyptic narratives, especially his claim about the excessively emotional and reductive rhetoric of the apocalypse. Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), 104–107.

order to kindle the last, vain hope that life may be brought back to earth via the process of evolution. Fortunately, this does not really compromise the symbolism of the story—especially its metaphoric representation of the sea—which is its most effective and successful part. Irrespective of the flawed rhetoric, the final message is clear: there will be no rebirth, either in the form of a miracle (the water no longer has "properties of transfiguration"[117]) or in the course of gradual evolution over geological time.

Perhaps what Gordimer was aiming at in "Second Coming" was the undermining of the widespread environmentalist position based on Western traditions of liberalism, democracy, and Christian ethics. To be sure, the story proves the futility of the essentially conservative notion that the environment can be protected by small-scale actions from within a given social system. If Gordimer was arguing in favour of a more radical stance, then it remains unexpressed. Instead, the story conveys her scepticism with respect to technological achievements, which do not go hand in hand with raised ethical awareness. In a Jawaharlal Memorial Lecture delivered in 1995 and titled simply "Our Century," she referred to the past century as "the most murderous century of which we have record," concluding that "humankind has not known how to control the marvels of its achievements."[118] From that time little has changed, and Gordimer's reflection is equally pertinent in the context of the 21st century. "Second Coming" is convincing proof that Gordimer's reflection on the discrepancy between technological development and ethical awareness was part of her concern for the natural environment. This is hardly surprising since the protagonists of Gordimer's short stories and her novels are defined not only by political and social change but also—and equally importantly—by their attitude to the environment, to which they are inexorably linked.

Conclusion: Environmentalism in the Context of Social Justice

As I argue throughout this book, Gordimer's conception of writing was defined by her belief that literary works are an adequate response to a given political situation only if they give us access to the experience of living at a particular point in time. Writing about the state of "being here" is inextricably connected with exploring a world that is shaped by social, political, and environmental

117 Gordimer, *Life Times*, 549.

118 Gordimer, *Living in Hope and History*, 236.

issues. This chapter has shown that in Gordimer's stories, with their nuanced analysis of social relationships, this exploration of the world is often conducted by exposing the environmental and the socioecological unconscious: the blind spots at the centre of our vision, created by a confluence of ideology and personal convictions. Her works show how colonial, neoliberal, and capitalist ideologies act on individual consciousness, shaping instrumental attitudes towards the environment.

Another important characteristic of the stories discussed in this chapter is their emphasis on the necessary connection between environmentalism and social justice. As I have shown, Gordimer frequently considered man's harmful impact on the natural environment in the context of social and economic inequalities between affluent and developing countries. She was also concerned about the exploitative use of natural resources, which—she clearly saw—strikes most deeply at the developing countries. Gordimer's concern with social justice both in her fiction and non-fiction is consistent with her belief that "art is on the side of the oppressed."[119] Indeed, it is Gordimer's focus on the weak and underprivileged that gives rise to her socioecological vision.

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119 Nadine Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*, ed. Stephen Clingman (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 291.

Conclusion

"An Exploration of Life": Final Remarks on Nadine Gordimer's Conception of Writing

This study has put a strong emphasis on the relationship between literature and politics, seeing this connection as central in Gordimer's works, including her short stories. The close relationship between politics and literature is evident not only in the stories published during apartheid but also in those that came out after the democratic transformation in South Africa. What recurs in Gordimer's late writing is her emphasis on the need to redefine oneself in response to changing historical circumstances. This is the case in "**Dreaming of the Dead**" (*New Statesman*, 29 January 2007, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 2007), which is, at its most basic level, Gordimer's celebration of her friendships with Susan Sontag, Edward Said, and Anthony Sampson. Nonetheless, as I will now argue, this story is more than simply an attempt to revisit the past—it is an important expression of her views on identity.

At the beginning of "Dreaming of the Dead," Gordimer makes it clear that the deep friendship between herself and Sontag, Said, and Sampson is largely the result of their shared understanding of their role as public intellectuals who are not confined by a narrow-minded loyalty to their nationality or ethnic belonging: "This is not a group in which each sees personal identity and its supposed unquestioning loyalty cast by birth, faith, country, race, as the decisive and immutable sum of self."[1] Without rejecting these categories, Gordimer argues for intellectual daring and the goodwill necessary to distance oneself from more regional loyalties in order to forge identities that will facilitate understanding and cooperation between different cultures.

1 Nadine Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 31.

In formulating the notion of a dynamic identity, shaped consciously by the individual rather than rigidly predetermined by the criteria of culture and religion, Gordimer was influenced by the life and writing of her friend Edward Said. In a short article devoted to Said, she asserts that it is only the notion of heterogenous and non-totalist identity, as promoted by him, which can be opposed to the homogenizing forces of nationalism. For Gordimer, Said's most impressive and laudable achievement is that "he *used* these multiple identities, made them into the creation of a complete personality."[2] Her comment is quite an accurate reflection of Said's thinking: at the end of his memoir *Out of Place*, he compares his identity to "a cluster of flowing currents" that "require no reconciling, no harmonizing."[3] Said refers to this state as "a form of freedom," adding that it is the awareness of the inherent heterogeneity of his identity that taught him "to prefer being not quite right and out of place."[4]

One of the reasons for Gordimer's attraction to Said's conception of the intellectual was, no doubt, his success in turning his situation as an exile in the United States into a tenable intellectual position. The concept of exile so deeply penetrated his thinking that he formulated the notion of "the *exilic* intellectual,"[5] a person "marginal" and "undomesticated."[6] "The *exilic* intellectual," according to Said, takes the stance that enables him or her to abstract from a given ideology and, thus, never to take a given state of affairs for granted. Said's notion of the exilic intellectual is close to Gordimer's conception of her role as a writer. It can be argued that the state of never being entirely "domesticated"—that is, never accepting an ideology uncritically—was an imperative that informed her life and creativity. Indeed, as I have emphasized in this book, beginning from the mid-1970s, Gordimer reiterated how important it is to stay alert to the given political situation and to be ready to explore it without the burden of personal allegiances.

While Gordimer was deeply interested in politics, she consistently refused to see writing as an exclusively political activity. In 2001, she referred to writing as "an exploration of life,"[7] and it is not a far-fetched conclusion to claim

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2 Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times, 1954–2008* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 640.

3 Edward Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (London: Granta Books, 2000), 295.

4 Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir*, 295.

5 Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 64.

6 Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 63.

7 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 591.

that this is how she perceived it throughout her life. At the centre of this conception of writing is not the expression of political and social ideals but the pursuit of truth about the people living in a particular time and place. Gordimer looked upon herself and other writers as "looters,"[8] who collect fragments of observations about the people they meet and—using their gift of imagination—transform those insights into literature. The goal is to include in their works protagonists who are "*larger than life*, more intense, compounded and condensed in essence of personality than could exist materially."[9] In Gordimer's view, while the novelist is faced with the task of creating characters whose thoughts and behaviour are consistent over time, the short story writer concentrates on "a discrete moment of truth,"[10] which will give insight into the thoughts and motivations of the people described. Although the short story is necessarily fragmentary insofar as it shows only a moment in the life of a person, its aim is to give readers the experience of grasping the reality of the protagonist, which is sometimes created only in the space of a paragraph.

A particularly germane description of what Gordimer sought to achieve in her stories can be found in "**A Beneficiary**" (*Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black and Other Stories*, 2007). In one scene, a young woman admires the theatre performance of a great actor, who has succeeded in conveying to his audience "the wholeness, the life of a man, not just in 'character' for the duration of the play, but what he might have been before those events chosen by the playwright and how he'll be, alive, continuing after."[11] The completeness ("wholeness") of her characters is also what Gordimer's readers can admire in her stories, which—like the performances of the famous actor—can be called "enactments of life."

8 Gordimer's essay "Adam's Rib: Fictions and Realities" (1994), from which this passage is taken, is discussed in the Introduction.

9 Nadine Gordimer, *Writing and Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 6. The passage is quoted from the essay "Adam's Rib: Fictions and Realities" (1994).

10 Gordimer, *Telling Times*, 170. The quoted fragment is taken from Gordimer's essay "The Short Story in South Africa" (1968), which is discussed at length in Chapter One.

11 Gordimer, *Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black*, 127.

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Marek Pawlicki

„Obrazy życia": Opowiadania Nadine Gordimer

Streszczenie

Niniejsza monografia jest krytycznym opracowaniem jedenastu zbiorów opowiadań Nadine Gordimer wydanych w latach 1949–2007. Ważny punkt odniesienia stanowią również jej powieści oraz wykłady, eseje, artykuły, wywiady i korespondencja. W książce cytowane są niepublikowane dotąd fragmenty manuskryptów autorki przechowywane w Lilly Library w Bloomington (USA).

Monografia jest podzielona na siedem rozdziałów. Wstęp zawiera notę biograficzną, przedstawienie treści każdego z rozdziałów i główną tezę. Jak udowadnia autor, twórczość Gordimer powstała na gruncie jej przekonania, że literatura powinna być odpowiedzią na aktualną sytuację społeczno-polityczną, dając równocześnie głęboki psychologiczny wgląd w mentalność ludzi żyjących w określonym czasie.

W rozdziale pierwszym został przedstawiony rozwój przekonań politycznych autorki oraz wpływ tej ewolucji na jej koncepcję pisarstwa. Na podstawie tekstów publicystycznych Gordimer można prześledzić rozwój jej poglądów od fazy fascynacji liberalnym humanizmem w latach czterdziestych i pięćdziesiątych XX wieku, poprzez etap radykalizacji i zainteresowania marksizmem w latach sześćdziesiątych i siedemdziesiątych, aż po krytykę korupcji i neokolonializmu w latach dziewięćdziesiątych i w późniejszej dekadzie. Na tym tle rysuje się idea pisarstwa politycznie zaangażowanego, którego celem jest przede wszystkim opis życia w czasach współczesnych przez ukazanie dynamicznych relacji między bohaterami.

Koncepcja pisarstwa Gordimer opiera się na jej przeświadczeniu, że twórca powinien posiadać umiejętność utożsamiania się z ludźmi, których opisuje w swoich dziełach, a jednocześnie być gotowym zdystansować się od ich

poglądów i wartości. W rozumieniu autorki, pisarz winien tworzyć w swoistym napięciu między tymi dwiema postawami twórczymi, ponieważ tylko w ten sposób uzyskuje wgląd w świat wewnętrzny bohaterów, zachowując jednocześnie pewną neutralność niezbędną do oceny ich światopoglądu i zachowania. Wspomniana koncepcja twórczości Gordimer uwidacznia się w analizie jej opowiadań, które cechuje zarówno empatia w stosunku do bohaterów, w szczególności tych, którzy padają ofiarą nierówności politycznych i społecznych, jak i postawa krytyczna wobec obojętności i hipokryzji beneficjentów systemu.

Rozdział drugi dotyczy stosunków międzyrasowych w opowiadaniach noblistki. Metodologia tego rozdziału bazuje na badaniach Zygmunta Baumana, głównie jego refleksji na temat relacji „Ja-Inny". Analiza rozpoczyna się od utworów, w których autorka obnaża rasistowskie poglądy białej ludności RPA. Ważnym tematem w tym rozdziale jest również wpływ warunków bytowych na mentalność białych mieszkańców kraju, którzy, czerpiąc korzyści ekonomiczne z rządów nacjonalistów, stają się współwinni nierówności rasowych. Jako ostatnie omówione są utwory, których bohaterowie mierzą się ze spuścizną apartheidu i nowymi wyzwaniami związanymi z przemianami demokratycznymi w RPA.

W rozdziale trzecim poruszona jest tematyka polityczna w utworach Gordimer. Szczególnie istotny pod tym względem jest okres radykalizacji ideologicznej autorki w latach sześćdziesiątych XX wieku, w wyniku której zaczęła ona tworzyć literaturę poświęconą różnym formom zaangażowania społeczno-politycznego. W korespondencji z jednym ze swoich redaktorów Gordimer podkreśliła, że głównym celem jej prozy jest ukazanie wpływu polityki na ludzi. Noblistka pozostała wierna temu celowi aż do końca swojej kariery literackiej, postrzegając politykę poprzez pryzmat myśli i odczuć swoich bohaterów.

Przedmiotem czwartego rozdziału jest kwestia żydowskiego pochodzenia Gordimer i jego wpływu na twórczość pisarki. Zagadnienie to zostało poruszone przez kilku badaczy jej prozy, w tym Michaela Wade'a, który określił jej utwory jako „odkrywanie tego, co nieobecne, nieopisane."[1] Wade twierdzi, że Gordimer nigdy nie zmierzyła się ze swoim dziedzictwem kulturowym, stłumiła je i wyparła ze swojej twórczości. Wbrew opinii Wade'a i innych krytyków (m.in. Claudii Braude i Lindy Weinhouse), autor przedstawionej monografii

1 M. Wade, *A Sport of Nature: Identity and Repression of the Jewish Subject*, w: *The Later Fiction of Nadine Gordimer*, red. B. King (London: Macmillan, 1993), 155.

utrzymuje, że problematyka żydowska nie została wyeliminowana z utworów Gordimer, przeciwnie, stanowi często punkt wyjścia do rozważań nad literaturą i pisarstwem, alienacją i marginalizacją mniejszości etnicznych oraz wpływem traumatycznych wydarzeń na mentalność pierwszego i drugiego pokolenia imigrantów pochodzenia żydowskiego.

Rozdział piąty jest poświęcony postaciom kobiet w opowiadaniach noblistki. Dyskusję otwiera podrozdział stanowiący przegląd artykułów i esejów zawierających analizę twórczości Gordimer z perspektywy feministycznej. Przytoczone są tu wnioski badaczek jej twórczości, m.in. Dorothy Driver, Karen Lazar, Kathrin Wagner i Denise Brahimi. Omówiony jest również wpływ poglądów autorek feministycznych na przekonania pisarki. Najważniejsze postaci wspomniane w tej części rozdziału to Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Kate Millett i Shulamith Firestone. Wprawdzie w swoich wypowiedziach Gordimer kategorycznie odcięła się od feminizmu, jednak jej twórczość jest dowodem na to, że bliska jej była tematyka dzieł wspomnianych autorek. Wśród najistotniejszych tematów poruszonych w rozdziale znajdują się oddziaływanie ideologii patriarchalnej na życie kobiet, destrukcyjny wpływ ideologii apartheidu na stosunki międzyrasowe oraz konflikty osobiste. Wszystkie te problemy zostały przedstawione na tle przemian polityczno-społecznych w RPA.

W rozdziale szóstym omówiono temat relacji między rodzicami a dziećmi w prozie Gordimer. Punktem wyjścia są prace krytyczne badacza jej twórczości, Johna Cooke'a, który reprezentuje pogląd, że w swoich powieściach autorka stopniowo odwraca się od środowiska, w którym wzrastała, aby ostatecznie wyeliminować je ze swojej twórczości. Opowiadania noblistki rzeczywiście ukazują rosnący dystans wobec konserwatywnych wartości i postaw białych mieszkańców RPA, jednak wbrew temu, co twierdzi Cooke, Gordimer wraca do problematyki rodzinnej w swoich dziełach. Tematycznie i stylistycznie różnorodne utwory analizowane w tym rozdziale mają jedną wspólną cechę: ukazują problem używania władzy w związkach międzyludzkich. Autorka opisuje, jak postawy dzieci kształtowane są przez wartości i zachowania rodziców, w tym przez ich poglądy szowinistyczne i rasistowskie. Podobnie jak w poprzednim rozdziale, tutaj również relacje rodzinne ukazane są na tle przemian społeczno-politycznych w RPA.

W rozdziale siódmym przedstawiona została ekokrytyczna interpretacja opowiadań Gordimer. W oparciu o teorie Lawrence'a Buella i Byrona Caminero-Santangelo, autor monografii udowadnia, że problemy natury socjologicznej

i politycznej w utworach noblistki są ściśle powiązane z zagadnieniem relacji człowieka ze środowiskiem naturalnym. Na początku rozdziału omówione są opowiadania eksponujące kolonialne podejście do świata naturalnego oraz jego rolę w kształtowaniu postaw dominacji wobec ludzi i zwierząt. Istotnym tematem poruszonym w rozdziale jest eksploatacja środowiska naturalnego w kontekście problemu ubóstwa.

Ostatnią częścią książki są wnioski końcowe, w których podsumowana jest koncepcja pisarstwa i roli pisarza w społeczeństwie: Gordimer rozumiała pisarstwo jako "odkrywanie życia" i dążenie do psychologicznej i subiektywnej prawdy na temat doświadczeń ludzi żyjących w określonym czasie.

Książka uwzględnia obszerną literaturę krytyczną dotyczącą twórczości noblistki, przede wszystkim monografie publikowane w okresie największej popularności pisarki od lat sześćdziesiątych do dziewięćdziesiątych XX wieku, ale również najnowsze eseje i artykuły jej poświęcone. Znajdują się tu odniesienia do prac krytycznych takich badaczy literatury południowoafrykańskiej, jak m.in. Stephen Clingman, Dominic Head, Dorothy Driver, Rita Barnard, Karen Lazar i Stephen Wade, z którymi autor monografii wielokrotnie polemizuje w analizie poszczególnych opowiadań i powieści autorki.

Wydawca dołożył wszelkich starań, by skontaktować się z właścicielami praw autorskich dzieł użytych w publikacji. Autorzy i właściciele majątkowych praw autorskich, do których mimo wysiłków nie udało się dotrzeć, proszeni są o kontakt.

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Marek Pawlicki is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Literary Studies at the University of Silesia in Katowice. He is the author of the book *Between Illusionism and Anti-Illusionism: Self-Reflexivity in the Chosen Novels of J. M. Coetzee* and of articles on the works of J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Iris Murdoch, William Golding, John Banville, Anne Enright, and Colm Tóibín. His critical interests include South African literature, postcolonial studies, memory studies, and ecocriticism. His current research focuses on the postcolonial short story.

This is a thorough, informative, fully researched, intelligently organised and well-written book, which makes an important contribution to modern literary studies. Nadine Gordimer was one of the most eminent South African writers, who, in addition to her many highly successful novels, published eleven collections of short stories, making her one of the major authors writing in English in this genre of the last half-century. Surprisingly, no comprehensive study of her short stories has been published, and Marek Pawlicki's monograph fills this gap most impressively. It will be warmly welcomed by students of South African and postcolonial literature, and more generally those with an interest in the modern short story.

From the review by Professor Derek Attridge, University of York

* * *

Przedstawiona do oceny monografia bez wątpienia zasługuje na określenie jej mianem „osiągnięcia naukowego", gdzie słowo „osiągnięcie" rozumiem nie tylko jako coś istotnego i ważnego, lecz także jako dotarcie do celu, do granic, które przed naukowcem stawia określony przedmiot badań. Publikacja jest bowiem dokonaniem sensu stricto: w pełni kompleksowym i jak dotąd najbardziej wyczerpującym opracowaniem opowiadań południowoafrykańskiej noblistki Nadine Gordimer spośród wszystkich istniejących ujęć tematu. Na książkę Pawlickiego można spojrzeć wielorako: jako historię literatury południowoafrykańskiej, historię Republiki Południowej Afryki w XX i XXI wieku, historię Nadine Gordimer, czy wreszcie historyczno-literackie studium gatunku.

From the review by Professor Robert Kusek, Jagiellonian University