

Africa in the Fiction of Nadine Gordimer

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NADINE GORDIMER has pointed out that for modern man Africa has come to represent an inner condition — an aspect of his “spiritual consciousness,” a “state of regeneration,” and an “untapped source” of energy within himself toward which he may be seeking “the dangerous way back.” Inspiring hope as well as uncertainty, “this Africa is . . . only a new name for an old idea — man’s deep feeling that he must lose himself in order to find himself.”¹ Gordimer has described herself as a “romantic struggling with reality,”² and it is Gordimer the romantic who is aware of Western man’s longing to venture beyond the limits of his own world, beyond his conscious identity, in search of a vital centre, a primal wholeness and energy, within the Africa within his own psyche. Gordimer is, however, enough of a realist to know that those who have been drawn to the continent often have been more intent on asserting the permanence of a familiar racial and cultural identity — for Western man, his identity as master. In South Africa the result has been apartheid, which is only one aspect of what Gordimer has noted as the fragmentation of a society lacking a common language or history and unified neither by ties of ethnic kinship nor by a shared social or political ideology.³

The polarity of the romantic quest for a psychologically regenerative wholeness and the realistic recognition of diversity and isolation may reflect a deep structure of the South African experience. The history of the land is that of fragmentation and the assertion of separateness extending past the modern Pretorian

nationalist's rejection of the Commonwealth bond through the nineteenth-century Boer's resistance to and earlier flight from the embrace of British imperialism and back to the Trek Boer's struggle against control by Cape Town in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, looking into the remote prehistoric past through the eyes of the geologist reveals a period when southern Africa was the core and centre of a much larger entity, Gondwanaland, vast fragments of which drifted away to become South America, Australia, the Indian subcontinent, and part of Antarctica.⁴

Thematically and structurally important in Gordimer's fiction is a similar polarity as her white characters now allow the boundaries of their individual identities (their Western — usually European — selves) to become blurred and be drawn into a field of greater energy, now self-protectively draw back to maintain the ego's apartness and individuality. For Gordimer's characters the African past sometimes becomes destiny as their movement toward a centre of primal energy alternates with a centrifugal, escapist thrust away.

The journey into Africa is, for the European, a return to his origin as a human being and therefore a chance to uncover the buried foundation of his humanity. Although reluctant to accept the idea that a "man should have to lose himself . . . in order to find himself," Toby Hood, the young Englishman in *A World of Strangers* who, having taken a leap into the unknown territory of South African society, comes to the unexpected awareness of a remote kinship with the continent's life-affirming blacks, of a primal identity disrupted over the centuries; and he realizes that his very whiteness signifies his alienation from black Africa, the Western man's sacrifice of an inner vitality "drained off with the pigment fading out of our skin," with nothing left other than the "sense of loss . . . under a white skin."⁵

However deplorable may be the squalor and crowding in which the South African black is forced to live, there is something about this apparent disorder, this messiness, that proclaims life, such as the "fecund smell of . . . fermentation" in a "hovel room" and the "abundant life" radiating from dancing Sophiatown blacks (*A World of Strangers*, pp. 115, 146). Clearly the

reverse of the "dead coldness" of white youths attending an African jazz performance and the white cashier's dependence on chairs fixed into neat, assignable rows is the "abandon" and "hilarity" of the blacks and their impulsively convivial disruption of the seating plan.⁶

The middle-class white expects life to be neat, tidy — "it's dreadful not . . . to have order," says Jesse Stilwell, in *Occasion for Loving* (p. 15) — but the black world teems with the abundance of nature. In the crowding of a location it is as though life has "overflowed . . . all bounds": the walls of the dwellings "pressed on the pavement, the pavement trampled into the street."⁷ In the short story "The Bridegroom" the primitive lyre played by an African worker, its sounds like the "first music men ever heard," suggests a power able to dissolve the ethnic boundary between the blacks and their European overseer: for a moment the "barrier of tongues fell."⁸

In *Occasion for Loving* the main white characters are aware of the pull of Africa. Tom Stilwell is busy on a history of the continent while his house guest, Boaz Davis, becomes "lost" in the study of African music, and Tom's wife, Jesse, admits that the black male was the earliest object of her sexual fantasies (pp. 34, 267). Almost begging native dancers to "have some life" (p. 35), Ann Boaz seems most intent on making intimate contact with Africa; and symbolic of the young woman's willingness, if not need, to become a black Eve is her transformation into a Negress on the canvases of her black artist-lover, Gideon Shibalo.⁹ "Just step over the mess," says Gideon, in ushering Jesse and Ann into a borrowed apartment losing the orderliness of its European tenant (p. 121). And if before her affair with Gideon Ann is unaware of what "chaos" really is, the "wild disorder" inside the suitcase Ann takes on her risky trek through the South African countryside with Gideon suggests a threshold crossed into the unmapped wilderness of interracial intimacy (pp. 15, 222).

Before examining in greater detail Gordimer's treatment of the white woman in Africa, we should note the perils the Western ego is exposed to in the continent. Its title referring to the luckless Europeans who found only graves, not gain or glory, in Africa, "Livingstone's Companions" calls attention to the vulnerability

of the European self in the bush. Having taken a wrong turn on an assignment to retrace the course through central Africa of David Livingstone, Carl Church comes across a remote, isolated lakeside hotel run by a somewhat pathetic group of displaced and misplaced whites — perhaps serving as Gordimer's ironic commentary on the romantic-imperialist legend of a lost tribe of whites at the centre of the continent. Strangely drawn to waters that "drink him in," Church feels his identity as an adult male vanishing as his penis shrinks and even his specialness as a human being fading out of existence: for the fish swimming around him "he does not exist." In the words of an English girl confused and frightened by the bush, "it's not like town . . . you can just disappear."¹⁰

From *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* (1952) to *Livingstone's Companions* (1972) we are repeatedly reminded that Africa is a devourer consuming itself and those who would master it. At times it seems that the destinies of Gordimer's characters are in the jaws of the masses of insects that swarm through the land, picking clean the wilderness and invading human spaces to feast on almost anything from books to buildings.¹¹ What Africa does not devour, it effaces and symbolically obliterates. In *A Guest of Honour* a magnified fly on a telephoto lens blots out the image of Mweta, the leader of a newly-independent nation; and, ominously, it is the face of James Bray, the Englishman who has returned to Africa to help set up a modern educational system in the country, that fades away behind the insect-stained windshield of the car carrying him to a violent death (pp. 423, 464). In a scene reminiscent of Leopold Bloom's gazing with alarm at an eating place full of ravenous Dubliners in the "Lestrygonians" episode in *Ulysses*, the white girl in "The Defeated" stares with terrified fascination at the diners in the cavernous Hotel La Bantu "where the natives hunched . . . eating steaming . . . chunks of horror" that look like no meat she knows of and where, as though to engulf her, the "blood-embroidered sawdust" comes "spilling out of the doorway" (*Soft Voice of the Serpent*, p. 196).

Presented in such threatening, violently destructive terms, the idea of losing oneself sometimes produces its opposite — a self-preservative flight into isolation. As though in recoil from the

"terrifying waste of nature," its "appalling untidiness," Jesse Stilwell insists on seeing herself as "intact, alone" (*Occasion for Loving*, pp. 7, 19). And a vegetarian youth's horror at feeling himself polluted by one sip of pea soup laced with chicken stock at a dinner party ("I'm unclean") and panicked flight from the table to, appropriately, some rabbit hutches¹² is only an extreme example of characters — whites — insulating themselves from an external reality they cannot control. One thinks of the old jeweller in "Charmed Lives" whose peace of mind lies within the tiny metal and crystal confines of a watch (*Six Feet of the Country*, pp. 171-72); Tom Stilwell working on a condensed history of Africa in an enclosed balcony of his home, shut off from the sprawling and complicated reality of the real Africa (*Occasion for Loving*, pp. 4, 305); the Finn dancing "on his own" when he could be holding an attractive African woman (*Guest of Honour*, p. 271); and a Johannesburg "cut . . . in two" and blind to "half its life" as the result of apartheid (*The Lying Days*, p. 234).

What one critic has noted as the importance of corpses in Gordimer's fiction into the mid-1970's¹³ reminds us of the difference between the African attitude toward death (a return home) and the whites' feeling that death is a terminal calamity, the "final bankruptcy."¹⁴ It is as though the attitude of the latter is symbolic of a belief that the European has no future in Africa. At one point in *The Conservationist* the romantic longing of Mehring, ordinarily the practical man of business, to be buried on his farm, in his purchased soil, arouses the mockery of his sexual partner, Antonia. His fantasy of "sleeping forever with birds singing" above his grave is not only "corny" but insofar as it is based on the hope of preserving his identity after death in the minds of his land-owning descendants, futile, for soon, she predicts, the native will take back the land from Mehring's heir (by implication, from the children of Mehring's generation) and "no one'll remember where you're buried."¹⁵

Its landscape littered with "ant-eaten" birds (p. 170), the Africa of *The Conservationist* is still a devourer; however, in this, Gordimer's first major work of the 1970's, the emphasis is on the black African past which, emerging from so many decades of

internment, is about to swallow the physical signs of European history on the continent. If for Mehring's blacks the soil contains the promise of rebirth — the ground is a "cradle" for "their ancestors" — for Mehring the land is a "graveyard," a "cold thick hand" pulling him down into the muck (pp. 141-42, 215). The gravelike holes Mehring digs for European trees that probably will not take root in African soil, the suicide of a fellow-industrialist, the book in defence of homosexuality that Terry Mehring makes sure his father sees (pp. 144, 182, 213) — these seem to be omens of the approaching end of the white man's history in Africa. Emblematic of a future in which the suppressive order forced upon black Africa may be about to end is the Indian shopkeepers' water tank, optimistically adorned with a peace symbol, starting to sink into the mud (p. 234).

Long before this have been sunk into the continent the mine shafts from which the civilization of the South African white has gained seemingly endless renewal. Now, it is suggested, from these depths are emerging the exploited blacks whose physical labour has been largely responsible for the good life enjoyed by Mehring and his kind. If the natives' touching the black corpse (against Mehring's wishes) is sparking the old Africa back into life, just as the "dead" Solomon (the nameless black corpse's double) regains consciousness and health after having been attacked and left to freeze in Mehring's pasture (p. 159), for the white man, the act of touching and thrusting holds out little hope of revitalization. Mehring's restless search for new young women to penetrate and the earth's penetration by the South African mining industry in its constant search for mineral wealth spring from a basic, undifferentiated craving for power, regeneration. In Mehring's mind the female body and a mining site are barely distinguishable: the thought of a "firm [mining] dump . . . not softened in substance and outline" smoothly merges with the "imagined sensation" of a "lovely surface under his hand" and the down on flesh "brushed against lips" (p. 239). But all that Mehring seems able to produce sitting in a passenger plane likened to a "hospital ward" and thrusting his finger into the body of a teen-age girl next to him is the object he later hands to her, either a plastic plant or a live one that customs will not allow

into South Africa, and the risk of a ruinous criminal prosecution (pp. 125-26).

As is suggested by Antonia's pointing with her toe at a flower in the shape of a "perfect mandala" (p. 165), the thrust into flesh and earth is an attempted return to the vital centre of things, to the primal matrix, in search of wholeness and regeneration. Yet Gordimer's characters are also governed by the South African imperative toward separation. Antonia pulling away from her lover after sexual union to "establish . . . the vast gap" between her ego and Mehring's body (p. 100) is an image not simply of static polarity but also of an explosive escapist movement of whites away from the continent — with Mehring's ex-wife in New York, soon to be followed by her draft-dodging son, Terry (p. 70); Antonia abandoned by a husband in pursuit of Australian bushmen (pp. 66, 95); Antonia herself, the anti-government political activist, self-exiled in England to avoid arrest; and airborne Mehring away on his "frequent travels" across the globe (p. 36).

Undermining the white man's sense of security and compelling Mehring to "make a dash for it . . . sell the place" and desert "her" (literally, the pickup who may be luring him into some kind of trap, and symbolically, a mythic Africa harboured in the depths of Mehring's Western mind) is the discovery that the reality of Africa is, like the reality of blacks and women, far more disturbingly complex and dangerously ambiguous than ever imagined by Mehring the businessman, boss, and seducer.

A mandala image of a vital centre, a sign and source of energy and wholeness, the egg is, for Mehring, a talisman belonging only to him and his descendants. And if it symbolizes the dream of the self untouched by time and circumstance, it is also a reminder of the vulnerability of the self. In the short story "La Vie Bohème" a teen-age girl's upsetting introduction to her probable future, the loss of childhood wholeness in the messiness of marital intimacy, takes the depressing form of egg-smearing dishes in her married sister's sink (*Soft Voice of the Serpent*, p. 126); and in another story in the same volume, "The Hour and the Years," a middle-class wife's venture into adultery seems to be an attempt to cope with the fear — triggered by a kiss from her husband's egg-

flecked mouth (p. 34) — that she herself is being emotionally consumed by the demands and expectations of married life. Mehring the pig-iron entrepreneur values the fixed and immutable. Eggs that can break and run, like the guinea fowl eggs held by the black farm children (p. 11), are worrisome reminders of change (and perhaps of Lenin's revolutionary omelette); and as though to protect the "egg" of his masculine dominance from time's effect, Mehring, standing naked before the image of a nude calendar girl, cups hand around scrotum (pp. 45, 58). What Mehring demands are unbreakable eggs; and Antonia, although no teen-ager, embodies his ideal. Unlike some women, Antonia does not "disintegrate" after a few drinks: hers is the seemingly imperishable appeal of the "satiny stone eggs" from Mehring's boyhood days (p. 66). But Mehring's last fling in the novel, his brief but frightening encounter with the female hitch-hiker whose racial character is as indeterminable as are her intentions, arouses long-suppressed feelings of helplessness and vulnerability. Emblem of the imperishable, self-contained racial and cultural identity Mehring claims as his possession and intends to pass on to later generations of white lords of the African earth, the marble that the hitch-hiker finds in his car and holds in her hand in a way to suggest an object taken from his "thigh" becomes an "egg stolen from a nest" and, by extension, his closely-guarded guinea fowl eggs — eggs that "will never hatch" (pp. 54, 243).

A man from South West Africa with little liking for the South African Boer, primarily a speaker of English whose name is "perhaps" German (pp. 30, 45), Mehring is, in this encounter with the indefinable girl, confronting himself; the pig-iron man is cracking like an egg and being absorbed into the messiness of the African experience. Whether tart or police bait, coloured or Caucasian, the girl, with her "heavy jutting mouth," is not only a personification of Stone Age Africa but, her skin "muddy" and "grey-brown with layers of muck," the African soil itself, waiting to swallow everything down that mouth "open and wet for anything" (pp. 246-47). The peace sign on the water tank about to sink into the muck and also on Terry's book about the "unnatural violation of the male body" (p. 234) is a segmented oval,

a cracked egg; and, as Mehring learns, it is this symbol of the patriarchal vision of order and permanence that is being so rudely violated—being crushed and ground into the girl's mouthful of "messy sandwich," with "bits of egg" clinging to her teeth (p. 244). Finally, the supposedly imperishable egg, mandala, and talisman, is reduced to a "crumpled . . . ball" of wrapping paper added to the rest of the "mess" in the area (p. 248).

The shifting significance of imagery associated with physical closeness, especially touching and holding, in Gordimer's fiction provides us with a chart of the European's changing relationship to Africa. Characteristic of Gordimer's early imagery of physical connection is the lover's embrace that produces in Helen Shaw, the white heroine of *The Lying Days* a "marvellously full consciousness of being alive" (p. 211). Touching or grasping, hands span the gap between the isolated individual and some attractive force outside the self. Walking next to her first lover, Helen becomes the hand nearer to him, a hand ready for contact, union: "My whole body was poured into that hand as I waited for him to take it" (pp. 50-51). In the story "The Worst Thing of All" what momentarily abolishes the years and changed circumstances of life separating the South African Denys (now middle aged and fixed within a respectable marriage and career) from his youthful days when the free-spirited Sarah Mann had introduced him to a life of emotional intensity, of anguish mixed with joy, is the memory of his hand thrust up her skirt and into the woman's "scalding" wetness.¹⁶ And there is surely a connection between the awareness flashing through the mind of the architect in "One Whole Year, and Even More" (a man who lives by concepts and theories) that the *au pair* girl living with him and his family in their London apartment is "real . . . [like] the smell of the water and the glare of the light" from a river and his impulse to "thrust [his] hand" down her bosom (*Not for Publication*, pp. 107, 108).

In later works, however, imagery of contact takes on negative connotations. In *Burger's Daughter* touching is for Conrad— young drifter, Rosa Burger's lover, and perhaps police informer—the key act in the violently self-destructive vision of his finger stuck into a light socket.¹⁷ The white liberal's conviction that in a

reformed South Africa whites and nonwhites will touch in a condition of equality and fellowship may be as fanciful as the French medieval tapestry of the lady touching a unicorn's horn that Rosa sees on her European trip (pp. 340-41). Undercutting what appears to be an inspiring picture of interracial closeness — with Rosa massaging the back of a black woman, both in jail for anti-government activities — is the earlier phone conversation between Rosa and “Suffering land” (the embittered black man far different from the little “Baasie” of Rosa's childhood), who casts a very cold eye on that powerful craving within the white humanitarian to lose himself in the continent's darkness — “put on the light, Rosa” — and the heartwarming image of a white hand extended to the black African: “Whatever you whites touch, it's a take-over” (pp. 319, 321).

More recently, imagery of connection — whether indicating a desire to merge or to control — has tended to reverse direction, with the emphasis now on black Africa reaching out, grasping, taking. In “A Soldier's Embrace” the dark-skinned hand gripping the arm of a white woman for years a member of the privileged colonial elite is that of one of the guerrilla fighters who have just ended colonial rule.¹⁸ The hope for a future in which the European will remain inviolate would seem to be as empty as the wordless vow of the nervous white father in “For Dear Life” to protect the innocence of a voluptuous daughter revelling in her power to attract boys: “If anyone lays a finger on her —” (*A Soldier's Embrace*, p. 71).

In Gordimer's most recent novel, *July's People*, Victor, the son of Bam and Maureen Smales, feels the same about the village children staring at his electric car track: “. . . they musn't touch it. I don't want my things messed up.”¹⁹ But more than the white child's toys are being reduced to mess in the bush, and blacks do more than touch. First they lay claim to the key to the truck in which the Smales family has fled the bloodshed in the city, and then Bam's treasured shotgun is taken. As the truck, its parts coming off, is slowly turned into “rubbish,” one senses that the land itself is absorbing the vehicle (pp. 14, 69, 142, 153).

Science, we are told, destroys myth (p. 124), and as the white fugitives are stripped of their outer layers of middle-class morality

and liberal idealism, one sees revealed a class self-doomed by a basic inability to respond to the regenerative power of the old Africa, a class that has instead chosen to worship the fickle idol of Western technology. The Smaleses's golden calf is their yellow truck (the "bakkie") that in the past would carry them safely into and out of the African bush just long enough for short holidays (p. 147). With them, the self that could be extended outward toward an Africa reflecting a primal vitality buried within the white psyche has hardened into the jealously-guarded key to the bakkie and the shotgun with which Bam thinks to hold the bush at bay. Another idol that succumbs to the seeming disorderliness of the old Africa is the Smaleses's portable radio, their only remaining connection with the urban world of European values, which only crackles with a "chaos" of static when their need for information is most pressing (p. 124).

As has already been suggested, Gordimer's white females are especially open to the attractive spell of black Africa. "Why didn't I give him the money and let him go?" wonders the girl in "Is There Nowhere Else Where We Can Meet?" whose foolhardy grappling with a possibly dangerous Negro purse snatcher may express a secret need to possess, to regain, the man's blackness, to plunge "into [the] dark" (*Soft Voice of the Serpent*, pp. 94, 96). In other stories the female is a frontier where the races may meet, merge, like Sarah Mann, in "The Worst Thing of All," whose bed in times past, it is hinted, received black as well as white lovers (*Not for Publication*, p. 65), and the white woman in the title story to *A Soldier's Embrace*, who simultaneously clasps a native guerrilla and a European colonial soldier (p. 8).

Certain terms that call attention both to the link between the female and the African experience and to the mixed reaction this association may evoke in the European appear in a story which at first reading may seem to have little or nothing to do with Africa, "One Whole Year, and Even More." Her room a "terrible mess" and she herself "untidy," a "grubby little slut," Renata, the orphaned German *au pair* girl, by her very presence offers her employer a chance to make himself whole, to close the gap between the self he accepts and presents to the world (son of an English, presumably gentile, father) and that disturbingly

complicated part of his being from which he has emotionally insulated himself — his German birth and German-Jewish mother incinerated by the Nazis. As Renata moves from the edge to the centre of the architect's controlled, orderly world, provocatively sunbathing in a square of light in the middle of the floor and leaning her curvilinear form over the straight lines and sharp angles of his architectural drawing, the suppressed past begins to emerge. The fantasized movement down the girl's cleavage is a confrontation with the cleavage inside himself; for the hand that would touch the girl's crucifix, something familiar and acceptable, might also touch "some other little amulet," the protean symbol of an intolerably contradictory past he can ignore but never expunge — swastika and Star of David (*Not for Publication*, pp. 93-116 passim).

Such words as *mess* and *sluttish* (in its British usage) link a number of Gordimer females with a dangerous but potentially vivifying Africa. Like Africa, Gordimer's women exhibit a disorderliness, a "sluttishness," which — combining the "opposing forces of death and quickening, of decay and bloom" and radiating the "heat of life" even through visibly aging flesh²⁰ — may repel as well as attract. The parallel between the architect's determination to rush Renata, pregnant and unmarried, back to Germany and the European's reluctance to confront his own ambiguities in the mirror of Africa is suggested by the remark of the former that the same clothes "fit" him and his South African wife "indiscriminately" (p. 94).

Perhaps because of their openness to Africa's dark energies, to forces that might subvert the European patriarchal will to mastery, Gordimer's women sometimes become the white males' jealously-guarded possessions. Thus, in "A Company of Laughing Faces," the "boundaryless quality" of a young woman's first romantic kiss is immediately challenged by a constraint, her "first whiff of the heady drug of [a male's] will" (*Not for Publication*, p. 43). The spell that Africa can cast on the female is to be resisted. The white overseer in "The Bridegroom" is determined to keep his native workers, with their boundary-dissolving tunes, away from his young bride (*Friday's Footprint*, p. 86). In "The African Magician" (a tropical version of Mann's "Mario and the

Magician") the good-humoured challenge issued to a black stage hypnotist by the white passengers on a boat going up the Congo turns to outraged protest as a young woman, another white bride, reverentially approaches and in a trance of "absolute trust" touches the African (*Not for Publication*, p. 143). The European's determination not to allow such a union — whether as actual miscegenation or, symbolically, as an acceptance of African cultural values and attitudes — may explain the nostalgia for and the sense of separation from black people experienced by some of Gordimer's white females: in "The Talisman" a European woman's quick retreat after feeling a momentary "fusion" with the person she "had been" at the sight of a native girl in a dress worn by the white woman in childhood (*The Soft Voice of the Serpent*, pp. 168-69); Helen Shaw's complete loss of contact with Mary, the black girl to whom Helen had been close during their college years (*The Lying Days*, p. 274); and the South African-born white woman in "Native Country" who realizes only after years lived in Europe that her proper destiny lay in the teeming street life of her homeland, "among the black men and women" (*Not for Publication*, p. 228).

In "Vital Statistics" the grubby, basketball-playing teen-ager Ismelda unwittingly allows her human complexity to be flattened out by a camera into the two-dimensional simplicity of a beauty queen on a photograph (*Not for Publication*, pp. 187-88). This is analogous to the alienation of the white female from Africa, her transformation from a sluttishly real human being sensitive to the land's resonances into a regal or semi-divine being who is kept apart from the African darkness. In the short story "The White Goddess and the Mealie Question" we see that what the European male finds valuable in Africa is not a black Venus but rather a reassuringly light-skinned object of veneration — in this case, the porcelain "white goddess" praised as utter "perfection" by the Austrian husband of a South African unmoved by her mate's enthusiasm (*Six Feet of the Country*, p. 120). Worth noting is the fact that the name of a fellow-Austrian who goes into debt to buy this "white goddess," Dr. Landsdorf, is almost identical to the later Dr. Leinsdorf of "Town and Country Lovers: *One*," an Austrian whose black girl friend, frantically

hiding herself in the man's clothes cupboard as the South African police knock on his door, symbolically attempts to transform herself into a European by unconsciously pulling on his presumably white underwear (*A Soldier's Embrace*, p. 83).

Several stories in *A Soldier's Embrace* suggest just how meaningless is the white goddess figure, symbol of European inviolability, in contemporary South Africa. In "Siblings" the white goddess has degenerated into the lank form of the sometimes suicidal and psychotic Maxine who, as anachronistic with her socially eccentric behaviour as a "movie queen" out of "old-time pictures," may be about to disappear forever (pp. 40, 44). In "The Termitary" she is reduced in the adult narrator's memory to the grotesquely egg-bloated termite "queen" dug up from the centre of its subterranean labyrinth and boxed for eventual extermination; and in the narrator's recollection of her childhood in the 1930's it is clearly implied that the white South Africans' belief in the security of their position on the continent has, some four decades later, vanished as completely as the termites that dispersed once deprived of their life-generating queen (pp. 119-20).

In *July's People* a black appears in July's village with a box containing something else brought up from the depths of the earth; however, here the termite queen has turned into an amplifier from a mine abandoned by the fleeing whites — a device that can be used to attract the guerrillas in the bush to the village (p. 154). Although the pervasiveness of Gordimer's irony undercuts interpretation, one might consider the polarity present at the end of the novel — the helicopter toward which Maureen Smales dashes contains either Americans ready to airlift her out of the country or rebels hunting down whites — as a sign that the African queen is making her last run. And if through her conscious mind flashes the hopeful images of "a kitchen, a house," her unconscious mind seems primed for destruction. A short while earlier hypnotized by the sight of ants feeding on another insect, now Maureen is still entranced, here by the "whirling scythes" of the helicopter, which, with its "landing gear like spread legs" and its "beating wings" (pp. 119, 158-61), becomes a giant flying ant hovering over its prey.

NOTES

- 1 Nadine Gordimer, "The Novel and the Nation in South Africa," *TLS*, 11 August 1961, p. 521.
- 2 Nadine Gordimer, "A Writer in South Africa," *The London Magazine*, 5, No. 2 (1965), 28.
- 3 Gordimer, "The Novel and the Nation in South Africa," p. 520.
- 4 A. R. Willcox, *Southern Land: the Prehistory and History of Southern Africa* (Cape Town: Purnell, 1976), pp. 37-40.
- 5 Nadine Gordimer, *A World of Strangers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958), pp. 31, 146.
- 6 Nadine Gordimer, *Occasion for Loving* (New York: Viking, 1963), pp. 26-27.
- 7 Nadine Gordimer, *The Lying Days* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), p. 157.
- 8 Nadine Gordimer, *Friday's Footprint and Other Stories* (New York: Viking, 1960), pp. 89, 91.
- 9 For a discussion of the myth of the "Hottentot Eve" see Stephen Gray, *South African Literature: an Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 38-71.
- 10 Nadine Gordimer, *Livingstone's Companions* (London: Cape, 1972), pp. 14-15, 33.
- 11 Gordimer, "The Soft Voice of the Serpent," "The Prisoner," and "The Defeated," in *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* (London: Gollancz, 1953), pp. 3-5, 86, 200; *The Lying Days*, pp. 30, 89, 163, 269; "Happy Event," in *Six Feet of the Country: Fifteen Short Stories* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), pp. 152, 153; "The Gentle Art," in *Friday's Footprints*, p. 122; *Occasion for Loving*, pp. 17, 39, 161, 170, 231; *A Guest of Honour* (New York: Viking, 1970), pp. 51, 143, 173, 247, 256, 444; and "Inkalamu's Place," in *Livingstone's Companions*, pp. 98, 100.
- 12 Gordimer, "The Path of the Moon's Dark Fortnight," in *Friday's Footprints*, pp. 143-45.
- 13 Christopher Hope, "Out of the Picture: The Novels of Nadine Gordimer," *The London Magazine*, 15, No. 1 (1975), 50-54 passim.
- 14 Gordimer, "Six Feet of the Country," in *Six Feet of the Country*, p. 9.
- 15 Gordimer, *The Conservationist* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 167-68. Mehring's futile hope of insuring the survival of his name by passing the farm on to his son is pointed out by Kolawole Ogungbesan in "Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*: A Touch of Death," *IFR*, 5, No. 2 (1978), 111. Also see Michael Wade, *Nadine Gordimer* (London: Evans, 1978), p. 219.
- 16 Gordimer, *Not for Publication*, p. 83.
- 17 Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1980), pp. 16-17.
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