

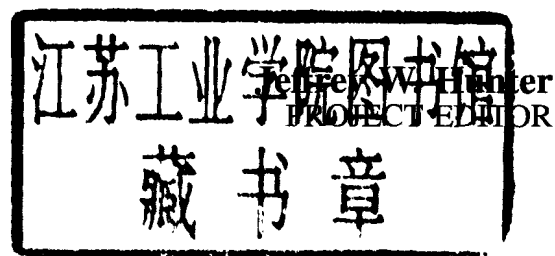
☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 263

Volume 263

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." In *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, 41-52. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 246, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 276-82. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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Nadine Gordimer

1923-

South African novelist, short story writer, and essayist.

The following entry presents criticism on Gordimer's career through 2007. For additional information on her life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 3, 5, 7, 10, 18, 33, 51, 70, 123, and 161; for discussion of the novel *The Lying Days* (1953), see *CLC*, Volume 160.

INTRODUCTION

The 1991 recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Gordimer is recognized for exploring the effects of South Africa's apartheid system on both ruling whites and oppressed blacks. Although the political conditions in her country are integral to her central themes, Gordimer's work focuses primarily on the complex human tensions that are generated by racial segregation. Lauded for her authentic portrayals of black African culture, Gordimer is also praised for using precise detail to evoke both the physical landscape of South Africa and the human predicaments of a racially polarized society. While some critics claim that Gordimer's detached narrative voice lacks emotional immediacy, many regard her as one of South Africa's finest authors.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The daughter of Jewish immigrants, Gordimer was born in Springs, a mining town near Johannesburg on the eastern portion of the Witwatersrand (or "The Rand," a huge ridge of rock that runs through northeastern South Africa). Her mother, Nan Myers, was born in England, and her father, Isidore Gordimer, was a Lithuanian-born jeweler. Although the family utilized a black servant, Gordimer was instructed to stay away from natives and knew nothing of their culture as a child. She began writing at the age of nine, and attended the Convent of Our Lady of Mercy before being removed by her mother on the pretext of a heart condition. Her first published short story, "Come Again Tomorrow," appeared when she was fifteen. In 1945 Gordimer studied for one year at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. While there, she encountered blacks (outside of the role of servants) for the first time in her life, which triggered

a burgeoning political consciousness in the young writer that would play a major role in her life. In 1949 she married Gerald Gavronsky and published *Face to Face* (1949), her first collection of stories. Gordimer and Gavronsky had one child and divorced in 1952. Her first novel, *The Lying Days*, was published the following year. In 1954 she married Reinhold H. Cassirer, owner and director of an art gallery, with whom she had a son. The English Academy of South Africa bestowed the Thomas Pringle Award upon Gordimer in 1969, and her novel *A Guest of Honour* (1970) was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction. She won the Man Booker Prize for her novel *The Conservationist* (1974), the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award for *A Sport of Nature* (1987), and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best Book from Africa for *The Pickup* (2001). In addition, Gordimer earned the Nelly Sachs Prize in 1985, received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1991, and was appointed to France's Légion d'honneur in 2007. Apart from a brief period in the south-central African nation of Zambia in the mid-1960s, she has spent most of her life in South Africa, mainly in the Johannesburg area, where she has served as a prominent political activist known for her opposition to the former apartheid government. Gordimer joined the African National Congress in 1990. Although she has traveled extensively throughout Africa, Europe, and North America, often undertaking lecture tours along the way, she continues to live in a suburb of Johannesburg.

MAJOR WORKS

The precision and evocative nature of Gordimer's prose has led to her association with a distinctive brand of social and psychological realism, while the ironic and critical tone of her work has colored her passionate indictment of the apartheid state. *A World of Strangers* (1958) relates the efforts of British writer Toby Hood to unite his cerebral Caucasian companions with his intellectual, black African friends, and contrasts the superficial lifestyles of the whites with the warm honesty of the blacks. The potential for power to corrupt those who wield it lies at the center of *A Guest of Honour*, which tells of the return of Colonel James Bray to his African homeland. Bray had been exiled by the previous government for his espousal of black revolutionary ideology. Upon his

return, however, Bray discovers that the new revolutionary government is just as corrupt and self-interested as the previous regime. When he speaks out publicly against the new administration, it targets him for assassination. In *The Conservationist*, a businessman (Mehring) owns a farm outside of Johannesburg that he uses as a haven to share with his mistress on weekends. His personal fears and prejudices are brought to a head when the corpse of an unidentified black man is found on his property, and his subsequent paranoia forces him to abandon the land altogether.

Rosa Burger, the protagonist of *Burger's Daughter* (1979), is the child of a renowned white South African communist. Following her father's death, Rosa moves to France to evade the pressures of living in his shadow. A chance encounter with a black childhood friend prompts Rosa to return to her country and take part in the political struggle for equality. The question of the future of South Africa is confronted in *July's People* (1981). Bamford and Maureen Smales flee Johannesburg after a rocket attack to hide in the African bush, where they become increasingly beholden to their former servant, July. A rumination on the element of power that underpins black-white relations in South Africa, the novel links the private realm of personal relationships with the public sphere of political institutions. *A Sport of Nature* concerns Hillela, the white widow of an assassinated black revolutionary, who, by the novel's end, becomes the first lady of a new black African nation once known as South Africa. A novel of personal and political awakening, *My Son's Story* (1990) sheds light on the sacrifices inherent in undertaking an ideological struggle. After losing his job for leading a student march, Sonny throws himself zealously into the mass movement for democracy, achieving renown as a rousing orator and savvy underground strategist. Although he keeps his revolutionary activities separate from his family affairs, his double life eventually grows to include a mistress—a white activist named Hannah—which furthers his detachment from those closest to him.

Set during the final days of legalized racial segregation in South Africa, *None to Accompany Me* (1994) focuses on a middle-aged white attorney, Vera Stark, who reexamines her life and her past after antiapartheid activists begin to be released from prisons. Gordimer's second postapartheid novel, *The House Gun* (1998), explores the relationships between blacks and whites in the newly transformed South Africa as well as the politicization of the characters' personal lives. An affluent white couple, Harald and Claudia Lingard learn that their only son, Duncan, has committed murder using a gun intended to protect the house from thieves. They hire a formerly exiled black lawyer, Hamilton Motsamai, to represent him, and thus begin the painful

process of emerging out of the sheltered lives that they have created. In *The Pickup*, a white, middle-class South African woman, Julie Summers, marries an impoverished Arab immigrant, Abdu. Abdu longs to establish himself in a prosperous, westernized country. When he is deported, Julie follows him to his desert village where she is enamored by the authentic way of life enjoyed by her husband's people. Abdu eventually receives immigration clearance for the United States, but Julie decides to stay behind, much to her husband's consternation.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have praised Gordimer's work for its exploration of the connection between the personal and the political. For instance, they have studied *July's People* as a text in which the external political environment forces the characters to reevaluate their sense of personal identity, and have interpreted the murder at the center of *The House Gun* as a catalyst for the intrusion of political realities upon the complacent lives of the Lingards. Commentators have also lauded *The House Gun* for the complex and socially suggestive relationship shared by the Lingard family and Hamilton Motsamai, with some characterizing Gordimer's rendering of Motsamai as one of the few positive depictions of a lawyer in modern literature. Additionally, reviewers have noted the cautious affirmation of liberal politics in Gordimer's fiction. Scholar Ode S. Ogede, for example, has identified the figure of Colonel Bray in *A Guest of Honour* as a symbol of both the positive and negative aspects of liberalism, claiming: "Bray's ambiguity reflects Gordimer's search for a mode of analysis that could represent the reality of daily life at a particular time in southern Africa in all of its contradictory complexity." Furthermore, critics have favorably compared Gordimer's fiction to the work of fellow contemporary African authors Ngugi wa Thiong'o, J. M. Coetzee, and Phaswane Mpe. Specifically, they have cited similar concerns with the social impact of neocolonialism in *A World of Strangers* and Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*, have underscored the use of classic Western literature to evoke a Eurocentric mindset in *My Son's Story* and Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, and have located the varied attitudes toward globalization in *The Pickup* and Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Commentators have also investigated Gordimer's ambivalence toward the mythologizing of South African leader Nelson Mandela, and have probed the significance of Zulu creation myth in *The Conservationist*. Moreover, reviewers have extolled Gordimer's meditation on the role of women in the political climate of South Africa, maintaining, as did critic Nancy Topping Bazin, that

“the bonding between the white woman and the black revolutionary remains a constant in Gordimer’s scenarios about the ways a white South African woman might fit into post revolutionary South Africa.”

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Face to Face: Short Stories* (short stories) 1949
The Soft Voice of the Serpent, and Other Stories (short stories) 1952
The Lying Days: A Novel (novel) 1953
Six Feet of the Country: Fifteen Short Stories (short stories) 1956; also published as *Six Feet of the Country: Short Stories*
A World of Strangers (novel) 1958
Friday’s Footprints, and Other Stories (short stories) 1960; also published as *Friday’s Footprint*
Occasion for Loving: A Novel (novel) 1963
Not for Publication, and Other Stories (short stories) 1965
The Late Bourgeois World (novel) 1966
A Guest of Honour (novel) 1970
Livingstone’s Companions: Stories (short stories) 1971
The Conservationist (novel) 1974
Selected Stories (short stories) 1975; also published as *No Place Like: Selected Stories*, 1978
Some Monday for Sure (short stories) 1976
Burger’s Daughter (novel) 1979
A Soldier’s Embrace: Stories (short stories) 1980
Town and Country Lovers (short stories) 1980
July’s People (novel) 1981
Something Out There: Stories (short stories) 1984
Reflections of South Africa: Short Stories (short stories) 1986
A Sport of Nature: A Novel (novel) 1987
The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics, and Places (essays) 1988
My Son’s Story (novel) 1990
Crimes of Conscience: Selected Short Stories (short stories) 1991
Jump, and Other Stories (short stories) 1991
Why Haven’t You Written?: Selected Stories, 1950-1972 (short stories) 1993
None to Accompany Me (novel) 1994
Writing and Being (lectures) 1995
The House Gun (novel) 1998
Living in Hope and History: Notes from Our Century (essays) 1999
The Pickup (novel) 2001
Loot, and Other Stories (short stories) 2003
Get a Life (novel) 2005
Beethoven Was One-Sixteenth Black: And Other Stories (short stories) 2007

CRITICISM

Jeffrey J. Folks (essay date winter 1998)

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[In the following essay, Folks addresses the restructuring of preconceived notions of personal and political identity in *July’s People*, highlighting the importance of language as a means of social dominance in the text.]

Nadine Gordimer chose well in selecting the epigraph, from Antonio Gramsci, for *July’s People*: “The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.” An interregnum is the period “between rulers”; clearly two “reigns” are suggested in the novel: the Smales have named their sons “Victor” and “Royce” (“royal”) and their daughter Gina (“Regina”), as contrasted with July, the “Julius Caesar” whose force ushers in change and who is perhaps representative of a more plebeian rule. If the interregnum is filled with “morbid symptoms,” it is also emptied of bogus authority; as a transition toward a more authentic future, it is inevitably a disorienting and sometimes threatening period. It may seem to the Smales that they have lost everything “back there” in Johannesburg, but the interregnum, as the point at which their accustomed life has been stripped to essentials, is also the beginning of a potential revitalization. As Gordimer writes at the conclusion of her essay “*Merci Dieu, It Changes*,” “Thank heaven for small mercies, not everything is predictable in Africa these days—whatever else has happened, the old equations, the defined roles, national and personal, good and bad, are all in question” (*The Essential Gesture* 220).

Focused on the interregnum and not the future per se, *July’s People* employs a futuristic narrative mode with which to examine the present as a transition period of “morbid symptoms”; that is, it is “seeing the present through the eyes of the future . . . Placing the phenomena of the present—its social roles, codes and patterns of behavior—under the dissecting microscope of the future” (Clingman 201-2). In Gordimer’s view the imagined “revolution” that has been underway for some time in South Africa has broader, indeed universal, application. She suggested in “*Living in the Interregnum*,” published the year after *July’s People*, that the basis of moral equivocation, whether in South Africa or in the West, is “fear of the abyss, of the great interregnum of human hopes and spirit” and an unwillingness to acknowledge “the victims of

Western standards of humanity," whether these are the victims of right-wing oppression in Latin America or communist terror in Asia or eastern Europe.

Like other recent white South Africa novels from the same years—J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Karel Schoeman's *Promised Land*—*July's People* is less a prediction of the future than an imaginative artist's "run through" for political change, an imaginative act that constructively investigates new roles.¹ Whatever the political composition of the new South Africa, a question very much unresolved when the novel was published in 1981, the new government that Gordimer envisages is a restoration of political power and ownership. The title of the novel is a play on "possession" in several senses, perhaps most significantly in expressing Gordimer's hope for a multiracial society, "a single common culture of the future," in which the Smales would actually be felt to be July's *people*. By presenting a largely white audience with the "disaster scenario" of violent revolution and ensuing anarchy, her recent fictions act both to dispel apprehension—"the unadmitted fear of being without structures" (*Essential Gesture* 269)—and to examine alternatives, as in the short story "A Soldier's Embrace" in which a prominent lawyer and his wife remain in Johannesburg after the "revolution," only to find their influence as white liberals marginalized and the government unable to control looting and violence. "Sometimes their [the police] actions became street battles, since the struggle with the looters changed character as supporters of the Party's rival political factions joined in with the thieves against the police" (*Crimes of Conscience* 37).

The giving up of power, that figurative abdication that is the central theme of *July's People*, is suggested in the concept of "interregnum" itself: one reign has come to an end, while the new rule has not begun. Without leadership, the interregnum is filled with false moves, confused sympathies, mistaken anxieties. The novel grasps at ways toward authenticity and justice, concepts that Maureen comes to late through her realization of life's insubstantiality. In that respect, the novel's philosophical terms derive partly from French existentialist thinking. Gordimer takes more from Sartre than Camus, although Richard Peck notes the "strong influence of Camus on [Gordimer's] thinking," while also suggesting that hers is increasingly an "activist existentialism" that "echoes Sartre's notion about the limitation of individual freedom posed by the other, the Look, the 'being for others'" (68, 73, 77). As in Sartre's writing, Gordimer's aesthetic strains against the mediated condition of art and subject. The urgency of Gordimer's historical condition threatens to overwhelm artistic distance as she privileges social reality, presence, and desire over conceptualization

and distance. In contrast with American or European postmodernist fiction, Gordimer can never be quite so skeptical or playful, nor can her work escape a particular sort of essentialism linked to her commitment to human rights and social equality. Yet Gordimer's keen awareness of the tension between moral essentialism and artistic freedom (an issue addressed repeatedly in the appropriately titled collection *The Essential Gesture*) safeguards her work from the dangers of political dogmatism.

In the context of the revolutionary events in the novel, an individual life possesses the same transitory beauty as the straw handicrafts that Gordimer describes in the markets of Madagascar: "There's nothing more satisfying to buy than something made of straw; it's beautiful, cheap, and cannot last—thus gratifying the eye, the desire to get something for nothing, and leaving one free of the guilt of laying up treasures less ephemeral than the flesh" (*Essential Gesture* 189). Increasingly Maureen's role in *July's People* is a similar perception of her culture's inconsequence: a confinement of ego and acquiescence of leadership that paradoxically she must *seize*—actively struggling, questing, learning—to lay hold of her "place in history." In her interregnum, Maureen exists in a state of physical and temporal dislocation, in a condition of "delirium" and "of not knowing where she was, in time" (*July's People* 17), the "state of Hegel's disintegrated consciousness" that Gordimer alluded to in "Living in the Interregnum."

Given the tension that in Gordimer's view always exists between artistic imagination and the urgency of historical reality, it is not suggesting too much to see Maureen, by Clingman's account "amongst the most ordinary of Gordimer's characters, politically considered" (170), as replicating the artist's relation to history at the present time. Quoting Joseph Brodsky that "Art . . . lies at the heart of all events," Gordimer makes the point in "Living in the Interregnum" that out of the artist's inner depths, out of the authenticity of transcendent and intuitive experience, comes "the most important intuition of revolutionary faith" (*Essential Gesture* 277). The abdication of a life of bad faith implies the opening of the opportunity, at least, for a new relationship with others and a new trust in oneself. In this sense of "revolutionary faith" Maureen's "future" is assured at the ending of *July's People*, whatever her literal fate. In the same essay Gordimer speaks directly of her own personal commitment to "the order struggling to be born"—a multiracial South Africa "conceived with and led by blacks"—in the same terms she used to describe Maureen: "I have entered into this commitment with trust and a sense of discovering reality, coming alive in a new way" (*Essential Gesture* 278). For Gordimer and

for her character, renunciation and trust, at this moment in South African history, are one and the same thing. "I admit that I am, indeed, determined to find my place 'in history,'" Gordimer writes (*Essential Gesture* 278). Her renewal as a woman/writer, conveyed in the erotic language of the novel's conclusion, is paradoxically a determined action—certainly the most dramatic action in a novel characterized by stasis—but one carried out through renunciation.

Thus, Maureen's role of self-examination parallels the role that Gordimer increasingly imagines for herself as a writer and South Africa citizen. (The similarity of names—the echo of "Nadine" in "Maureen," for example—suggests their identity in this most "personal" of Gordimer's novels). After speaking of her role as "a minority within a minority," she states: "Now I shall reduce my claim to significance still further. A white; a dissident white; a white writer" (*Essential Gesture* 272). Even the action of acquiescence is problematic, for "even the ego that seeks to abdicate this alienation does so in an assumption of its own salvation that in itself expresses ego and alienation" (*Essential Gesture* 263). *July's People* is most autobiographical in posing the central question of Maureen's/Gordimer's role in the political future. As a white South African wishing to participate cooperatively in a multiracial South Africa, the author and her character possess "something to offer the future. How to offer it is our preoccupation" (*Essential Gesture* 264).²

For both author and protagonist, then, the question of "how to offer *one's self*" is the crucial issue. Although black leadership in South Africa will define the nation's political future, Gordimer believes that whites are confronted with a different but similarly daunting challenge, to redefine their social consciousness: "The hierarchy of perception that white institutions and living habits implant throughout daily experience in every white, from childhood, can be changed only by whites themselves, from within" (*Essential Gesture* 265).

Like Rosa Burger in *Burger's Daughter*, Maureen Smales has uncritically accepted the consciousness that she has been taught in childhood and adolescence. Maureen resembles many white South Africans who, in Richard Peck's phrase, "continue to wait remarkably isolated from the struggle around them in their private gardens" (74). Maureen's leftist convictions, like those of Harriet Haberman, the young leftist in "A Correspondence Course" whose commitment is tested by the appearance of a black political fugitive, appear to be more "fashion" than substance. "[Harriet] wears German print wrap-around skirts decorated with braid by Xhosa women in a Soweto self-help project, sandals thonged between the toes, and last year cut

her shawl of pale brown hair into a permed Afro." (*Crimes [Crimes of Conscience]* 63). Gordimer's irony similarly exposes the limitation of the white liberal's patronizing gestures—the Smales "admired Castro . . . from a distance"; Bam directs July to address him as "sir" instead of "master." By exposing such patronizing "language of kindness" *July's People* "breaks the mould of a liberal myth of reconciliation" (Clingman 203). Also, Maureen's sentimentalized attachment to memories of the mining town where she grew up—memories of her father and of Lydia, the family housekeeper who carried her school case (source of the famous photograph)—suggest connections between Maureen's personal and political immaturity. Maureen's life, like that of Rosa Burger in *Burger's Daughter*, follows a dialectical course—the obverse in fact of Rosa's movement from "exemplary radical child" to the exploration of "private life" and into final synthesis as "Rosa Burger" and not "Burger's daughter." Cooke writes that "only through her private time in France . . . could Rosa sever the hold of her father and feel herself as the place at the center of her world" (84); conversely, only through exploring a public and political world beyond her attachment to the private life will Maureen sever the domination of her father, as figured through the aggressive "provider" Bamford.

The novel accomplishes "a deconstruction of a whole system of social relations—a system imagined, as all such systems are by those who inhabit them, as being 'natural,' a matter of kind" (Neill 92). What the Smales understood as a stable relationship of marriage is shown to be dependent on a middle-class environment and especially on the sense of ownership that props up the marriage. Bamford Smales finds his "male role" as provider and "reassurer," based as it is on economic control, quickly exploded. Increasingly disoriented, he no longer knows how to address Maureen, since she no longer matches his understanding of "wife," "mother" or "Maureen." Similarly, to Maureen he becomes "the blond man" or simply "he." For her part, the props to marriage are her properly middle-class focus on "the house and children," her "hobbies" of reading and gardening, with an intermittent unimportant part-time job to fill up her time. Certainly irony is attached to both the fact that Maureen has enjoyed reading as a "hobby" and the fact that the one novel she takes from Johannesburg is Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi [The Betrothed]*, a historical novel that now could not compete with the reality of events but might earlier have led her toward comprehending her own withdrawal from social reality. Even now, as Newman points out, the only scene in Manzoni that in her "hungry nostalgia" has meaning is the account of "bread riots" (88). Neill elucidates the parallels

between Manzoni's novel and the plot of *July's People*, pointing out that *I Promessi Sposi* is a truly historical work "singled out for special praise by Georg Lukacs" (85).

The abdication in *July's People* reverses the guest-host relationship between July and Maureen; instead of July's being encamped in the Smales servants' quarters the Smales now live in July's mother's hut. Gradually, even the reversed roles are exploded; July will not replace Bamford as protector, as Maureen clearly wishes him to. All protectors, patrons, and chiefs have been dismissed. That procedure of reversal, based to some degree on Brecht's shock technique, is intended to educate Gordimer's audience "to be astonished at the circumstances under which they functioned" (*Essential Gesture* 274), not to institute a new regime that simply reverses the older one. The reduction of the Smales to the tropes formerly used to describe the colonized subject (e.g., Bam with the radio, "the baffled obstinacy of a sad, intelligent primate," [50]) is associated with the gradual reversal of their sense of power and conversely with July's sudden sense of his own independence. Accompanying that is a feminist mode of reversal: "it is increasingly Maureen who is able and has to take the initiative. As Barn's sexual and political status degenerates, Maureen's accordingly grows in strength" (Clingman 199), yet Maureen's "assertiveness" is directed in large measure toward her own assumptions, with the implication that her increasing vitality, the passionate sense of erotic release in the final "rescue" scene, is earned by the effort of ridding herself of an illegitimate habit of control. The reversal of roles leads not to the reinstating of patriarchal power but to a role for women within the political and communal order.

The novel's contrast of physical conditions between "the life back there" and "now" serves to undermine the reality of an identity focused on economic control, as Gordimer's analysis unmask the importance of things in the Smales' existence. As Clingman puts it, the novel is "a political economy of culture where 'meaning' is never far from 'means'" (196). The yellow bakkie, a "hobby" truck used for shooting, is an example of the misplaced appreciation of objects in the suburban setting. The bakkie's prominence in the novel, its transformation from "toy" into a possible means of escape and then back into July's "toy," is surely intended as a rebuff directed especially at Bamford Smales, who clings to the truck and the shotgun as props to his masculinity. The insubstantiality of suburban consumer culture is again pointed up as Victor's racing car track is, without electricity, rendered useless to him, though not to the village children who prize its fragments for their very objectness. The suburban dependence on fragile distribution

systems is ironically scored as Royce, the youngest child, wails for his parents to buy some Coca Cola. Money itself has now become "bits of paper" to the Smales but not yet to the villagers, who have come to attach a value to its possession independent of purchasing power. The novel is "subjecting the features of white bourgeois culture in South Africa to a radical and penetrating analysis," one that shows "how relative all the old absolutes had been" (Clingman 196). The novel includes many contrastive examples: house versus hut, pets versus animals as food, sports (Barn's bird-hunting) versus hunting for survival (wart-hog hunting), eating versus feasting, wilderness as hobby (camping, birding, and botanical manuals) versus real wilderness, suburban trash (orange plastic bags) versus useful objects (rope, containers), bathed flesh versus body odors including, as Maureen learns, "the odors that could be secreted by her own body" (103).

Maureen's language is subverted not just by the contrast between English of the suburbs and the pidgin and native speech of the village but by the endless difficulties on all sides of speaking truthfully, made apparent once the speaker has stepped outside the familiar place. "Phrases they had used back there," including the "liberal" morality aimed at both Afrikaners and "reactionary" homeland Chiefs, are now irrelevant. Left behind is "the deviousness natural to suburban life," for example, in the "repartee" between a husband and wife alienated by the purposelessness of their very existence (89). References to July's "shopping" (53) point up the disjunction of language in the word's expansive suburban connotation (Maureen's "shopping") versus the discrete reality of "visiting the Indian" for July. Judie Newman correctly notes that July's English "lacks all abstractions and any tense but the present" (90), a fact that separates his consciousness from that of his former employers.

Indeed, "preoccupation with their old code" is so habitual that the Smales automatically translate African language as mere "sounds" that they then imagine as native equivalents of "newspaper, library, archives and theater" (quoted in Cooke 166). The consequences of Maureen's unwillingness to learn an African language, even the patois of the mining camp (rather than study ballet), are highlighted by her isolation from the village, her inability to understand the local radio (ironically their last link to the white government), her inability even to keep pace with Gina's understanding of African language and culture.³ July's mother scornfully refers to "this white woman who had to be taught" (131), and in fact the process that the Smales have entered is one of learning from all those whom they had ignored. Stimulating, challenging, threatening them for the first time since their marriage, the novel's dramatic action centers on risk.

According to Neill, Gordimer's novel "lays bare the whole structure of assumptions embedded in the language by which its characters are made and out of which they have made their world" (84-85). It is especially the language of ownership that is exploded: in the village, "Everybody has cats, nobody's got one." Gordimer makes it clear that the black majority must create the new "words that would make the truth that must be forming here, out of the blacks, out of themselves" (127). For words such as "gumba-gumba," for example, there is no English equivalent ("carnival" is too staged, "holiday" too decorous, "party" too neutral and bland).

Not just language, but the accompanying cultural consciousness that it encodes is scrutinized, especially the assumption of order conveyed by "the existential coherence we call concept" (*Essential Gesture* 263). Maureen "has been part of a world which places a particularly high value on the distinction between individual and context" (72-73), and in which conceptualization is an intellectual tool for social control. Maureen's association with the word "taxonomy," for example, and with photography suggests a detached observer and classifier, looking from outside, ordering and arranging the others. In the scene in which Maureen is picking wild foods with the village women, the women are spread out in the landscape, forming a collective "keeping the pattern of the flock of egrets" (92), but Maureen is outside this group. She is the "photographer or overseer . . . one who 'sees over'" (Cooke 169).

Maureen's photography also suggests her culture's use of technology, or rather its habitual misuse, to make the other invisible by erecting a technological barrier between the self and others. The role that communications technology plays in supporting a false consciousness, what Gordimer referred to as "the perceptual clutter of curled photographs of master and servant relationships, the 78 *rpms* of history repeating the conditioning of the past" (*Essential Gesture* 270) is instanced in the photographic exhibits of "black township life" that the Smales were accustomed to seeing in suburban malls. As in the famous photo of Maureen and Lydia, printed apart from the physical conditions that largely determine their human relationship, the problem of context is important, but more important yet is the need to replace conceptualization with instinct and desire. As Neill notes, "the photographer's perspective necessarily omits a kind of knowledge which is essential to the full comprehension of the image"—the unspoken but shared knowledge of peoples living together over time (78-9). Increasingly, Maureen is forced to resign her role as observer and

composer of the frame. Her perspective and that of the novel evolve toward a communal and decentralized point of view.

Like her husband, who is reduced after the disappearance of his shotgun to lying helplessly asleep on his stomach, Maureen by the novel's end "was not in possession of any part of her life" (139). Both Maureen and Bam are de-sexualized in a way that reveals the dependence of their sexuality on power—Bam as a result of loss of male power and privilege; Maureen as loss of her context and "role," a version of the urban vamp that she enacts leaning back on the car ("Auto show style"), which is a "parody of her own sexual and economic dependency" (Newman 91). As Newman writes, Maureen's idleness in the village is "only an exaggeration of her former function in society, trading sexuality for economic security" (Newman 87).

Maureen's relations to others, especially to July, are redefined, beginning with her belief that "she and July have a special understanding (a recognizable white South Africa syndrome)" (Clingman 200). Her hypocritical belief in the transcendent value of intimate relationships is exploded as she learns that "love too is contextually defined, no more than a function of a certain kind and style of possession" (Neill 83). As Neill writes, "The humanist essentialism on which her notion of identity was founded is progressively undermined by what she learns about July" (83)—his pilferings and the relative ease of his decision to "desert" Ellen, the town-woman. Not just July's linguistic assaults but nature itself seems to undermine the Smales' accustomed intimacy. Their lovemaking, in the damp hut, without privacy and bathing facilities, violates their antiseptic norm of cleanliness. Elemental imagery structures the novel with references to earth (earthen huts, land, agriculture, mud, dirt), air (the foul air of the hut and the ever-present sky), fire (the hearth fire, the sun), and water (river, rain, drinking, bathing, and laundry water). This reduction to elemental forces, along with the unaccustomed sense of appearing "undressed" in the small hut dispels the Smales' illusions concerning the basis of "civilized life." Like all important relations in her life, sexual intimacy has its analogue in the one overriding relationship, that of control. Indeed, Maureen's authority at the beginning of the novel, as defined by her life "back there" in suburban Johannesburg, posited a relationship to others analogous to the role of censor in apartheid South Africa. Like the censor of books that Gordimer describes in "**Censors and Unconfessed History**," Maureen practices "a form of social and cultural control" in her relationship with July—"a we controlling a *them*" (see *Essential Gesture* 253).

As Ngugi wa Thiong'o and others have argued, the crucial imperial mode of domination is the control of