

Nadine Gordimer and the Politics of Literature in the Twentieth-Century

Redefining the Responsibilities of Political Literature

by

Natalie Marcoux

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Abstract

Literature's political role has often been questioned: whether literature should be seen as a piece of art—a thing in itself—or as an imitation of reality with political meaning. South African novelist, Nadine Gordimer, wrote the majority of her books during apartheid, redefining the way political literature should be created. Rather than writing novels with a clear political agenda, Gordimer turned to the power of literary aesthetics to reveal the complications and tensions of society throughout apartheid. While black protest writers in South Africa believed the sole purpose of literature was to reveal the oppressions that they have faced, Gordimer, a white female writer, turned instead to the aesthetic theories of Roland Barthes and Theodor Adorno while framing the characters and plot lines of her novels. As this thesis will reveal, by turning to these theorists, Gordimer created a new genre of political fiction—a blending of the aesthetic to reveal the political—in order to most affect her readers. And as the thesis will conclude, the Nobel Prize committee awarded Nadine Gordimer the first South African Nobel Prize in Literature rather than the protest writers, praising this oblique way in which she acknowledged the politics of her country throughout her novels.

Throughout the thesis, the reader will acquire an idea of how political literature, in the example of South Africa's apartheid literature, most effectively influences a reader. The introduction will provide a brief political background of apartheid, revealing some of the tensions that already existed between black and white writers. Additionally, the introduction will begin to explore the qualities that give literature its value and how the protest writers may not have upheld these expectations. From here, the introduction turns to Nadine Gordimer, introducing her own opinions of the role of a political writer and her distinction between her political efforts and literary work.

Chapters One and Two will look at Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People* since these novels, published between 1979 and 1981, were published during a time of great political protests of apartheid. In these chapters, however, the thesis will reveal how the novels focused more on the difficulties of personal relationships, intimate moments, and times of reflection among the characters rather than broadcasting the widespread revolutions that were occurring. The focus of these novels, instead, reflects the theories produced by theorists Roland Barthes and Theodor Adorno, theorists who acknowledged the limitations of literature to affect and reflect reality. Whereas Barthes published theories on the inability of language to fully encapsulate reality and the significance of removing the author from a text, as explained in Chapter One, Adorno rejected a defined purpose and meaning of a text, as explained in Chapter Two.

Chapters One and Two turn to two of her essays published shortly after *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People* that directly refer to Barthes and Adorno. In these essays, "Living in the Interregnum" and "The Essential Gesture," Gordimer redefines the responsibilities that should be felt by a political writer. As she draws on these theorists in these essays, Gordimer references the styles of the black authors less and less and instead appeals to a completely new literary world—the aesthetic world.

Upon analyzing the literary techniques of Gordimer in Chapters One and Two, Chapter Three turns to the recognition of Gordimer by the Western literary world, whose theorists acknowledge literature as an autonomous art form. In 1991, Nadine Gordimer was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, recognizing *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People* as two of her most significant pieces of work. The award recognizes the literary accomplishments of her novels, and

yet calls upon the ability of her novels to help progress the anti-apartheid movement. In this sense, her explorations of the tensions found in language, personal relationships, and private movements are recognized as influencing the reader politically. And as the thesis concludes, Gordimer's attention to the aesthetic allows her to be regarded as one of the most influential writers in South Africa. Through these appeals to these theorists—both in her essays and novels—along with her recognition by the Nobel Prize committee—Gordimer defines a new genre of political fiction: an incorporation of the aesthetic to promote the political.

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: <i>Reflection Rather than Projection</i>	12
I. Language: Rejecting the Familiar and Defining the Unknown.....	15
II. Relationships: A New Identity for New Relationships.....	23
III. Projection Through Reflection: Looking Back to Move Forward.....	28
Chapter Two: <i>Recognition in the Personal</i>	30
I. Evoking the Sense of Recognition.....	33
II. The Negative Dialectic in the Wake of Recognition.....	41
Chapter Three: <i>Gordimer's Recognition by the Western Literary World</i>	50
Chapter Four: <i>Closing Remarks and Future Projects</i>	57
Works Consulted.....	62

Introduction

You see, writing for me is not a political activity. Before anything else, I am a writer. But because the society in which I live is so permeated with politics, my work has become intimately connected with the translation of political events, of the way politics affect the lives of people. I imagine that the South African government considers me a political adversary—as if I were someone utilizing my profession to combat it. But I myself would not call what I do a political activity, because even if I lived elsewhere, I would still be a writer.

– Nadine Gordimer, 1979 (Servan-Schreiber 108).

To what level do we define literature as an expression of political opinion? During a time of oppression, such as South Africa’s apartheid, what expectations can we have that novelists will speak for political change through their creative works? Are we able to separate the politics of a novel from its status as an independent work of art, or do we expect a commitment from the author to address the political and social problems of their environment? This thesis will explore the responsibilities of writers through the role Nadine Gordimer played during South Africa’s apartheid in order to better define the role literature plays in times of political oppression. In particular, this thesis will reveal how Nadine Gordimer, a white female author and the first South African to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, navigated these responsibilities, deciding to reject what had been expected in South Africa’s literature and turning to the world of European literary theory and its focus on the aesthetic. In what sense can we trust that Gordimer’s writing is, in fact, “not a political activity” even while writing during this period of legalized segregation?

Before turning to the responsibilities Gordimer felt and exploring how strongly her novels reflect highly aesthetic theorists, I will first look at the history of South Africa’s apartheid. South Africa faced centuries of segregation, beginning with the expansion of the Dutch East India Company in the seventeenth century, followed by British imperialism (Thompson 70). As the British and the Dutch descendents—known by the British as the Boers and by the Dutch descendents as Afrikaners—established more settler states, the African people

found themselves “decimated and largely displaced” (Thompson 56, Beinart and Dubow 1). As South Africa entered the twentieth century, the conflicts between the Africans and the white settlers turned peaceful in the sense that tension was found more in *civil* conflicts than military. As William Beinart and Saul Dubow write in their introduction to *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, the “solidity” of South Africa in the absence of military conflicts provided an opportune moment for the white settlers to implement a legalized segregation system. White South Africans—both British and Afrikaners—believed that legalized forms of segregation would grant them economic and political benefits by regulating the movements of non-whites, and so, through apartheid’s laws, non-whites were removed from urban areas and placed in “homelands” from 1960 until the mid-1980s.¹ These homelands served to remove non-whites from living in “South Africa proper,” which they could only enter when their labor was explicitly needed and they carried a pass that allowed them to pass through (Marais 22).

Towards the second half of this displacement era, anti-apartheid protests began to amass, particularly after the Soweto Rebellion in 1976.² Beinart and Dubow state,

After the Soweto rebellion of 1976, it became increasingly difficult for the state to contain protest and insurrection. The deference which whites expected in the high apartheid years [1960-1976]—and to some degree received—gradually gave way to a

¹ As introduced in Beinart and Dubow’s introduction, “The Meaning and Context of Segregation,” p. 1-25.

² In 1974, the Afrikaner government mandated all schools to teach only in Afrikaans. Students from many of the black schools, where classes had been taught in either English or their tribal language, began to protest until they participated in a full uprising on June 16th, 1976, known as the Soweto Rebellion. Although these students were only armed with sticks and stones, the Afrikaner police shot at the students, many of them while running away, killing almost 200 (“Soweto Student Uprising”).

distinct culture of opposition, shaped in particular by the emergence of the black consciousness movement and the inspiring leadership of figures like Steve Biko. (20)

As these segregated people began to organize against these apartheid laws, the significance of the written word to spread their stories of oppression became increasingly important in their efforts to mobilize protests. As a result, “protest literature” became the anti-apartheid activists’ expectation for how black South Africans were expected to write, especially during the Black Consciousness movement, a movement when black anti-apartheid activists largely excluded the support of white liberals from their efforts.³ Njabulo Ndebele, an acclaimed essayist and writer on South African literature and culture, reflected on the role of protest literature in his 1984 essay, “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary.” According to Ndebele, a protest writer writes in a way to induce guilt in white audiences for apartheid’s oppressive ways; literature is written based on the belief that, “If the oppressor sees himself as evil, he will be revolted by his negative image, and will try to change” (48). With this objective, Ndebele continues, “the literature works in this way: the more the brutality of the system is dramatized, the better; the more exploitation is revealed and starkly dramatized, the better. The more the hypocrisy of liberals is revealed, the better” (48). Ndebele reveals there are various expectations for protest literature: the anti-apartheid activists expect these writers to propel their protests and the writers and activists expect the white audiences to have certain reactions.

³ The Black Consciousness Movement began to form in 1967, led in part by Steve Biko. According to Biko, “Black Consciousness is in essence the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their operation—the blackness of their skin—and to operate as a group...” (Biko 49). The Black Consciousness Movement developed “to wean blacks gradually from their dependency, in material and intellectual terms, on whites” (Mzamane, Maaba, Biko 100). The Movement, as described “was never *anti-white*; it was *pro-black*” (100). Uniting based on the blackness of their skin, however, alienated white liberals who were also resisting apartheid.

Protest literature took on an even more defined role when it became known as a “cultural weapon”. In 1985, anti-apartheid activist Mafika Gwala expressed the directing role of literature in his essay, “Writing as a Cultural Weapon.” In this essay, Gwala connects the direction of the liberation movement with the direction of black South African writing: “What direction the liberation struggle takes in the 1980s...that is the direction of the black South African poet” (53). And due to their oppressive experiences: “We cannot write outside of our experience in a society where social deprivation is taken for granted” (47). Literature, essentially, is inevitably linked to politics. Horst Zander, author of *Fact – Fiction – “Faction”: A Study of Black South African Literature in English*, takes Gwala’s comments, along with protest writer Mbulelo Mzamane’s, to support his claim that the Black Consciousness writers rejected a Western aesthetic of “‘art for art’s sake’” (Zander 192). Mzamane stated in 1977, “The critic must bear in mind that the African artist has consciously concerned himself with his world, his people and their destiny. He’s divorced from the concept of ‘art for art’s sake’ and sees his art as being for ‘life’s sake. He intends his art to be functional...” (qtd in Zander 192). As members of an oppressed race, black authors looked to literature as a political tool, rather than an art form; literature became a way in which they thought they could represent reality and lead the path towards change.

The expectations for literature’s accomplishments—the function of literature—will be defined as the *responsibility* felt by writers throughout the thesis. And as we have now read the protest writer’s rejection of the “art for art’s sake” aesthetic, we look to how and why Gordimer relied on this very definition of art. Although we must remember that black South Africans had access to extremely limited education throughout apartheid, it is interesting that a black writer and member of the Black Consciousness Movement would criticize the black protest writers for failing to incorporate the techniques of “modern works of literature.” In 1966, Lewis Nkosi

called attention to the failures of protest literature in his essay “Fiction by Black South Africans,” suggesting that he expected these protest writers to be at least knowledgeable of these modern works:⁴

If black South African writers have read modern works of literature, they seem to be totally unaware of its most compelling innovations; they blithely go on ‘telling stories’ or crudely attempting to solve the same problems which have been solved before—or if not solved, problems to which European practitioners...have responded with greater subtlety, technical originality and sustained vigour. (245-246)⁵

Nkosi’s comment that “telling stories” is not enough to produce quality pieces of literature carries on in future comments made by other literary scholars. He finds that without aesthetic expertise—without “subtlety” and “originality”, the works influence very little.

In 1980, Professor Gareth Cornwell of Rhodes University, a South African university, published an essay titled “Evaluating Protest Literature” in the magazine *English in Africa* in which he also comments on the limited effect of direct protest literature. He explains that, “one of the first things to strike the reader [of writers of protest literature] is their deliberate and unequivocal attempt to involve him in a verifiable external world” (53). Cornwell explains the weakness in these “deliberate and unequivocal” attempts by calling on how Richard Hoggart finds literature’s value. He begins his essay with a quotation of Richard Hoggart’s “Why I Value Literature”:

⁴ Lewis Nkosi was a highly influential writer for black South Africans throughout apartheid as well as a member of the Black Consciousness Movement. He has remained a strong literary voice since writing for *Drum* magazine, the magazine which served as the platform for anti-apartheid activists, in 1950 (Steibel and Gunner xvi).

⁵ This essay originally published in *Black Orpheus* 19 (1966): 48-54.

‘I value literature because of the way—the peculiar way—in which it explores, recreates and seeks for the meanings in human experience; because it explores the diversity, complexity and strangeness of that experience...; because it re-creates the texture of that experience; and because it pursues its explorations with a disinterested passion (not wooing nor apologizing nor bullying)’. (qtd in Cornwall, 51)

The “deliberate” way protest literature involves the audience, according to Cornwall, contradicts Hoggart’s definition of the expected qualities of literature, literature with a “disinterested passion,” “not wooing nor apologizing.” Cornwall calls on Hoggart to explain that literature must *explore* rather than *tell* the “diversity, complexity and strangeness” of an experience.

In 1986, Nkosi published another essay in which he finds the particular weaknesses in protest literature compared to the weaknesses found by European critics. Nkosi states,

In modern times European criticism has become prejudiced against politically inspired art, with a pragmatic message; but that this should be so is not entirely the fault of such criticism; all too often politically committed artists have supposed, quite erroneously, that it is sufficient merely to have a grievance against someone to produce a work of art. Protest literature only fails to live up to its own ambitions when it makes its ‘message’ a pretext for all other failures: shallow characterization, insufficient attention to language, and an incompetent handling of artistic form in general. (“South Africa: Black Consciousness,” 435)

Here, Nkosi acknowledges a sentiment of the European literary world—that art should not have an overtly political message. According to Nkosi, however, the failures of protest literature are not found in their political messages, but because of *how* these messages appear: the “shallow characterization, insufficient attention to language, and an incompetent handling of artistic

form.” And as the thesis will reveal, these three weaknesses of the protest writers—characterization, language, and artistic form—were Nadine Gordimer’s strengths and came to be the way in which she *incorporated* the political in her novels, rather than projected it.

*

Nadine Gordimer wrote against this background of protest literature but in a very different tradition when she became the first South African writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature—the first South African writer to be so publicly acknowledged and praised by the Western literary world. The Nobel Prize was awarded to Nadine Gordimer in 1991, eight months after South Africa’s President F.W. de Klerk announced his plans to repeal the apartheid laws, symbolizing a degree of acceptance of South Africa back into the international world. In this oppressed culture, which saw the rise of protest writers writing for freedom and equality in their own country, why did the first Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to a South African go to Nadine Gordimer, a white female? What qualities did her novels hold that the Nobel Prize board did not see in the protest writers’? How did Gordimer view her responsibilities as a writer in a politically oppressed time and how did she reshape the expectations of a political writer?

According to Gordimer, the commitment to protest literature undermined the quality of literature, even though she understood why the black writers may have been writing this way. A few years before *Burger’s Daughter* was published, Nadine Gordimer wrote the essay “A Writer’s Freedom” in 1976, which explained the pressures placed on black South African writers during apartheid:

There will be those who regard him [the protest writer] as their mouthpiece; people whose ideals, as a human being, he shares, and whose cause, as a human being, is his own. They may be those whose suffering is his own. His identification with, admiration

for, and loyalty to these set up a state of conflict within him. His integrity as a human being demands the sacrifice of everything to the struggle put up on the side of free men.

His integrity as a writer goes the moment he begins to write what he ought to write. (230)

Although Gordimer sympathizes with the situation of the black author, she does not allow this sympathy to prevent her from stressing the “integrity” of the writer. According to Gordimer, black writers face a tension between upholding the integrities of a human being and the integrities of a writer, often sacrificing the integrities of a writer.

Before moving forward, I would like to clarify that Gordimer praised the protest writers’ efforts in the anti-apartheid movement and did not intend to undermine their work. As seen in her Nobel Prize speech and beyond, Gordimer highly respected the ways these individuals put themselves at risk. Furthermore, the reader must remember that black and white writers were exposed to very different educations. For this reason, the thesis first draws on Nkosi’s observed failures of protest literature as he knew first-hand the situation of these protest writers. This thesis intends to focus on Gordimer’s engagement with literary criticism—the theories of Roland Barthes and Theodor Adorno, in particular—as something that could be compatible with political aims.

*

As the beginning epigraph reveals, Gordimer saw herself as a writer *first* and then as a political activist. She acknowledges that any incorporation of politics in her work is a byproduct of living in such a politicized country rather than any explicitly political aims she may have had. Andrew Ettin, author of *Betrayals of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer*, writes:

Understandably we cannot avoid political and ideological issues; not only do they seem inescapable for anyone writing about a South African author but they are explicitly engaged by Gordimer's creative work. Still, her fiction also deserves to be seen for the art that it is, not because art is greater than life, but because her writings remind us that art and commitment need not be antithetical. (3)

And through her artistic form, Gordimer created these highly aesthetic, obliquely political novels—novels that included the elements Nkosi was calling for in protest literature. Her novels focus on the tension resting in language choice and personal moments relatable to any reader rather than on explicitly political messages, as seen in protest literature. As will be revealed in the following chapters, Gordimer created her own genre of political literature: an incorporation of the aesthetic to promote the political.

This thesis will focus on Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People*⁶, two novels that were written at the culmination of this "high apartheid" era, during this period of protest and opposition to the South African government. I will analyze these novels by focusing on how they foster a sense of *reflection* amongst the characters—especially the white characters—rather than projecting any specific political agenda. As we have read, the protest writers saw their literature as a way to project change. The success of protest literature would be determined by how it influenced political action. Gordimer's novels, however, focus more on the characters reflecting back on their past behaviors and beliefs. Her novels work to explore the tendencies of human nature, rather than directly speak to the readers on how to overcome apartheid. As the thesis will reveal, this sense of reflection in Gordimer's novels reveals the limited ways Gordimer believed

⁶ Published in 1979 and 1981, respectively.

novels could actively influence society, limitations that Gordimer describes by calling on the aesthetic theories of Roland Barthes and Theodor Adorno.

In my first chapter, I will walk the reader through these moments of reflection that take place as the white characters in her novels realize that the language they have become accustomed to does not actually explain the realities of apartheid. The terms they use to predict what may happen in the future and what has happened in the past do not carry the weight of reality—and these limitations of language are closely connected to the theories of Roland Barthes, the theorist Gordimer turns to in her 1985 essay on the writer's responsibility, "The Essential Gesture." As we have read, Gordimer resisted the title of a political writer and yet, as the first chapter will reveal, Gordimer's incorporation of Barthes' theories encourage a political reaction in her readers through her aesthetic techniques.

In my second chapter, I will continue to explore the ways this sense of reflection is fostered in Gordimer's characters by Theodor Adorno's theories. In Gordimer's 1982 essay, "Living in the Interregnum," Gordimer calls on Adorno's objection to the complete dependence of personal experiences when shaping a society's culture. As elaborated in her essay and other responses to protest literature, Gordimer also rejects this dependence. And so, Gordimer's novels can be difficult to comprehend—the dialogue is often unmarked, the plot can be hard to follow, and apart from the protagonists, characters can be hard to identify. Among these moments of difficulty are personal moments known to any reader, no matter their background—identifying one's self apart from one's parents, navigating sexual tensions, and confronting the difficulties of being a parent. As the characters reflect on these moments, the reader experiences a sense of recognition that could not be discovered if the writer was only retelling specific personal experiences. Instead, Gordimer turns to writing about *universal* personal experiences, allowing

the reader to identify with the characters and perhaps adjust their own perceptions of apartheid as the characters adjust their own.

Following the first two chapters, I will move on to discuss the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Gordimer in 1991. As will be revealed in this thesis, Gordimer distinguished her style of writing from the existing South African literary culture. She turned to highly aesthetic literary theorists—as shown in the themes and styles of her novels and also called directly on in her essays. What, then, can we make of the Nobel Prize in Literature—a highly regarded Western literary award—choosing Nadine Gordimer as the first South African recipient, as opposed to one of the protest writers? The Nobel Prize ties together all that we have looked at in the thesis thus far—that Gordimer has redefined the responsibilities of a political writer and the style of a political novel, and this redefinition is recognized in the awarding of the Nobel Prize.

Chapter One

Reflection Rather than Projection

Nadine Gordimer centers *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People* on themes of reflection and discovery of what has occurred in the past, a strategy to engage apartheid obliquely rather than directly. The possessive titles of these novels point to the way Gordimer focuses on the protagonists who must re-identify themselves in new environments, rather than reveal the overall oppressive realities of apartheid. As Ettin writes, "The place about which she writes is not simply a background or landscape, no matter her obvious affection for that landscape; rather, it and the people who inhabit it are the subject and substance of her art" (*Betrayals of the Body Politic* 3). The novels *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People* both follow white female protagonists, Rosa and Maureen, as they find themselves living amongst black South Africans during political revolutions. As these main characters interact with these black South Africans, Rosa and Maureen begin to realize that they must redefine the perceptions of their relationships. In addition, they realize that the language they used to describe their situations never revealed the actual realities of apartheid: the degree of oppression and pain felt by the black South Africans. And so, as we read, we see Gordimer framing her novels around the power of re-defining language and adjusting perceptions in personal relationships—elements that reflect Roland Barthes' theories on the aesthetic—in order to most accurately depict the realities of apartheid.

*

Burger's Daughter, published in 1979, follows a white revolutionist's daughter, Rosa, as she comes to terms with her own political responsibilities after her father dies in prison serving a political sentence. As Rosa enters adulthood, she struggles with automatic associations by others with her father and sets out at the beginning of the novel to find a way to leave South Africa, forgetting her past and all she has seen. As the daughter of a labeled communist, Rosa had been

restricted from owning a passport. As Rosa contacts her father's activist acquaintances to find a way out of the country, she finds herself repeatedly surprised at her lack of understanding of the black South African political struggle. For example, Rosa, acknowledges that she has grown up surrounded by revolutionists, but not until she leaves her house and reflects back on what her father's acquaintances have been able to accomplish does she realize the long-lasting hardships these activists have faced. There have always been rumors of change, Rosa admits, but only when talking to her first roommate outside her home does she comprehend that the Terblanches, a white couple her father worked closely with in the resistance, are *still* waiting for this change:

The Terblanches, going from shabby suburb to prison, and back from prison to shabby suburb growing old and heavy (she) selling cartons of curry, and deaf and scaly-skinned (he) on a pension or charity job from friends—they wait for that day when rumour will gather reality, when its effect will be what they predict, as their neighbors (whom they resemble strangely, outwardly) wait to retire to the coast and go fishing. (109)

Rosa realizes that the Terblanches are tirelessly sacrificing their daily lives for the end of apartheid. They have gone to jail for this cause to only return back to their suburbs with little change.⁷ They focus on protest as their white neighbors focus on retirement and Rosa looks to leave South Africa. While Rosa may have grown up in an environment where adults were all fighting for change, she realizes she had forgotten the extent of their efforts.

Rosa reflects on what little has changed throughout their fight—“blacks still carry passes twenty-five years after he [Dick Terblanche] first campaigned with them against pass laws and went to jail” (110). She has heard the stories—“the banishments, the exiles, the life

⁷ The reader should note that Gordimer describes these suburbs as “shabby,” as well as describes the poverty these white activists faced. In this novel, Gordimer also reveals the class disparity among white South Africans with which white readers can connect.

sentences...the everyday mythology of that house”—yet realizes that since she has become so *familiar* with these efforts, she has lost sense of the actual struggles that have been faced and the sacrifices that have been made by the anti-apartheid activists, both black and white.

July's People also reveals the naïveté of a white family that had hired black servants in their home yet attempted to treat them as equally as thought possible. Published in 1981, *July's People* explores the role of race, class, and gender as black uprisings against apartheid force the Smales family out of their home. The Smales must take shelter in their black servant's village and as they become even more dependent on July for their survival, the family's misunderstandings regarding race and gender are explicitly revealed. Tension and suspicions immediately arise among Maureen and her husband, Bam, and July and his family. July's family struggles to understand why July has assumed responsibility for this white family while Maureen and Bam struggle with having to depend entirely on their black servant.⁸ When Maureen discovers that her supposedly honest servant had been taking small things from her home, she begins to question how much she really knew July while he was working in their house: “These things were once hers, back there; he must have filched them long ago. What else, over the years? Yet he was perfectly honest...If she had not happened...to be here now, she would never have missed these things: so honesty is how much you know about anybody, that's all” (36). July's stealing, however, is out of necessity, which Maureen overlooks and instead judges his character by the desperation he may have been feeling. As Maureen fails to identify with July's needs, Gordimer then reveals Maureen's hypocrisy. As Bam and Maureen count their malaria pills, Bam realizes that they have more than he thought. When he asks Maureen where they got

⁸ Although it can be said that Maureen and Bam always depended on July, since he was, in fact, their servant, this dependency is completely different, as Maureen and Bam are now without a home. July is no longer helping them in their own home, but rather helping them in his, a vulnerability they had not previously experienced.

such a supply, she responds, “I looted. From the pharmacy. After they [black activists] attacked the shops” (36). Although Maureen immediately questions July’s character after discovering he took her household objects, she finds no wrong doing in looting from the pharmacy. She realizes the necessity of her actions yet fails to realize the necessity of July’s.

Throughout *Burger’s Daughter* and *July’s People*, the importance of reflection is a reoccurring theme. Returning to *Burger’s Daughter*, as Rosa finds herself reacquainted with her parents’ black South African anti-apartheid colleagues, she discovers how little she and other liberal white South Africans have actually progressed in their fight against apartheid. Similarly, in the first depictions of the Smales family in July’s village in *July’s People*, Maureen begins to realize how little she has done to support the oppressed South Africans. As both Rosa and Maureen immerse themselves in the lives of black South Africans, they realize that their assumptions of apartheid—both of the anti-apartheid activists and the everyday lives of black South Africans—were made in their protected homes and did not accurately reflect reality. As they uncover what they previously did not know, reflections on language and personal relationships reveal the importance of understanding the reality of the past in order to promote change for the future.

I. *Language*: Rejecting the Familiar and Defining the Unknown

As Rosa and Maureen are removed from their homes, they begin to realize the discrepancies between the language they use to describe black South Africans and the actual realities faced by the oppressed. In *Burger’s Daughter*, we see this realization at work as Rosa engages in internal and external conversations with Conrad, her first roommate and sometimes love interest since leaving her home. Throughout the novel, Conrad prompts Rosa to reflect on her life as a

revolutionist's daughter, challenging Rosa's self-development and perception of life in South Africa. He states: "I have the impression you've grown up entirely through other people. What they told you was appropriate to feel and do. How did you begin to know yourself? You go through the motions...what's expected of you" (46). As Conrad asks questions about her experiences, Rosa gradually begins to realize the consequences of becoming assimilated to these anti-apartheid activists; she has actually become unfazed by their experiences of oppression.

According to Conrad, Rosa has opposed apartheid because that is how she was told to act and feel. With people telling Rosa how to react to apartheid, Conrad believes that Rosa was unable to develop her own opinions on the matter:

What you've come to rely on...—I don't know how else to put it. Rationality, extraversion...but I want to steer clear of terms because that's what I'm getting at: just words; life isn't there. The tension that makes it possible to live is created somewhere else, some other way...The tension between creation and destruction in yourself. (46-47)

Conrad challenges Rosa to think and act beyond what she has been told. The activists have defined their efforts by the terms "rationality" and "extraversion."⁹ Conrad wants Rosa to escape these terms because there is nothing in them that challenges what she has previously been taught—there is no "life" in these "words." Instead, he wants her to create new emotions and destroy old ones. Conrad continues, "They [anti-apartheid activists] came together to make a revolution. That was ordinary to you. That—intention. It was ordinary. It was the normal atmosphere in that house" (50). Conrad suggests that Rosa became so accustomed to the

⁹ "Extraversion" is defined as "an overtly expressive person," whereas rationality is used to describe the ability of a person "to think clearly, sensibly, and logically" (Oxford American Dictionary). There is a clear distinction between the meanings of these words: extraversion as someone "overtly expressive" and rational as "sensible," which Conrad points out to Rosa. Both of these terms have been used to describe the activists, even though they are seemingly opposite.

“intention” of the anti-apartheid activists that she no longer saw the tension in their emotions. Instead, what the activists planned for the future seemed normal. This normalcy led Rosa to become unaware of the true reasons for these anti-apartheid activists’ actions. She no longer realized the extent of the hurt and pain these black South Africans felt. And so, through the instructions of Conrad, Gordimer explains how words cannot depict what is happening in reality—words are “just words; life isn’t there.”

The reader can see that this moment in the novel, although focusing on the limitations of language, still holds a particular historical significance. *Burger’s Daughter* takes place in the early, to mid-1970s and the historical placement of this novel is especially pertinent to Conrad’s suggestion that life does not take place in words. These conversations in the Burger household took place *before* the Soweto Rebellion, which, as explained in the introduction, ended the period of high-apartheid. During high-apartheid, white officials were accustomed to the black South Africans succumbing to their legalized oppression. In this sense, the meetings of the anti-apartheid activists in Rosa’s home could have been seen as only words exchanged, rather than action—“life”—pursuing change.

This experience corresponds to what Gordimer describes more theoretically in her 1984 essay, “The Essential Gesture,” in which she draws on Roland Barthes to describe language’s inability to fully encapsulate reality. From the beginning of *Burger’s Daughter*, the reader is introduced to Barthes’ theories on language as Gordimer challenges the reader to reevaluate his or her reliance on the written word. The idea that language is inadequate to the full complexity of life—as suggested by Conrad—reflects Barthes’ theories of language. Gordimer recalls, “Roland Barthes wrote that language is a ‘corpus of prescriptions and habits common to all the writers of a period.’ He also wrote that a writer’s ‘enterprise’—his work—is his ‘essential gesture as a

social being'. Between these two statements I have found my subject, which is their tension and connection: the writer's responsibility" ("The Essential Gesture" 410). Gordimer draws on Barthes' theories from his *Writing Degree Zero*, published in 1953, in which Barthes writes: "The writer's language is not so much a fund to be drawn on as an extreme limit; it is the geometrical *locus* of all that he could not say without...losing the stable meaning of his enterprise and his essential gesture as a social being" (10). Essentially, Barthes argues that the writer is limited in what he would like to portray by the biases and structures of the language that is available—and so, he relies on *gestures*.

Drawing on Barthes' "essential gesture" is integral for Gordimer's approach to writing and allows the reader to better understand how reality cannot be completely described in literature. According to John Cooke, author of *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes*, "As Gordimer once paraphrased it [about creating literature], 'You thrust your hand deep into the life around you, and whatever you bring up will have something of the truth there. But you've got to thrust deep into it.' No wonder she was attracted to Barthes's definition of writing as the writer's 'essential gesture.' Not just 'statement' or 'business'—*gesture*" (60). As Cooke explains, Gordimer does not make explicit statements in her novels or attends to any business or obligations. Instead, she explores more indirect ways to relay the truth of apartheid, methods which we have begun to see in *Burger's Daughter* and will be revealed in *July's People*.

Barthes' theories on language as a limitation continue to be seen throughout *Burger's Daughter*, particularly when Rosa agrees to help with her father's biographer's book. Rosa recalls on her own the inability of language—particularly stale language most commonly used—

to describe South Africa's anti-apartheid efforts. In an internal dialogue the reader presumes is with Conrad, Rosa recalls finding herself aware that the biographer was,

...Respectfully coaxing me onto the stepping-stones of the official vocabulary—words, nothing but dead words, abstractions—that's not where reality is, you flung at me¹⁰ — national democratic revolution, ideological integration, revolutionary imperative, minority domination, liberation alliance, unity of the people, infiltration, incursion, viable agency for change, reformist option, armed tactics, mass political mobilization of the people in a combination of legal, semi-legal and clandestine methods—those footholds have come back to my vocabulary lately through parrying him. (142)

Rosa calls these “official” words “footholds”—suggesting that these words are in some way safe and reliable to describe the anti-apartheid activists. These footholds, she now realizes, are “nothing but dead words” and she has used them to avoid giving direct answers to the biographer. Although she admits to slipping back to their use, her own awareness of her use of these words and her awareness of the number of ways to shallowly describe the environment projects a desire to change—to move away from the official dictionary and learn how to communicate on her own.

In this interaction between Rosa and her father's biographer, Rosa recalls how “reality” is not found in words like “national democratic revolution, ideological integration, revolutionary imperative,” etc. She admits to using these words with the biographer regardless of their inaccuracies because they both understand what they are *intending* to describe. Since we have seen Gordimer turn to Roland Barthes' theories in *Writing Degree Zero*, it is reasonable to interpret this interaction as another application of Barthes' theories. Barthes' 1967 essay, “The

¹⁰ The reader presumes this “you” refers to Conrad, although the reader is often unsure of the sources of dialogue throughout the book, as to be discussed in the next chapter.

Death of the Author,” removes the presence of the author when a reader interprets a text and as Barthes suggests, the meaning of a text should take shape in the reader’s interpretation rather than the author’s intention:

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. (4)

Barthes reveals how the meaning of a text is determined by how it affects the reader, rather than by how it has been used before or what the reader thinks the author intends. The “text’s unity,” which here suggests a text’s proposed meaning, is left up to the comprehension of the reader; the reader is the destination of the text.

Turning back to the example of Rosa and her father’s biographer, we see how knowing the destination of a certain kind of language results in their using these abstract, “official” words they both understand since they know each other’s history—words that Rosa then realizes do not represent reality. Here, the varying levels of impersonality that are found in pieces of literature—and when a political formation is imposed on by specific language—are informed by Barthes’ structuralism. According to Barthes, when language remains impersonal, it avoids relying on the assumed meaning of its source. Therefore, language must be removed from the source’s “history, biography, [and] psychology” (“Death of the Author” 4). And as Gordimer reveals in this conversation between Rosa and the biographer, the effects of knowing the source of language leads to abstraction rather than reality. As Barthes’ theory implies, “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but its destination” (4). Therefore, the author cannot assume that he or she writes for a

specific audience. Essentially, if the author's opinion and bias is prevalent throughout the novel, as seen in the protest literature, "reality" becomes lost.

*

July's People also addresses the concept of "dead words,"—stale words that fail to describe reality and distract the speaker from the need to define what has been said—which projects a sense of reflection in the reader as Gordimer's inclusion of characters who redefine their use of language serves as an invitation for her readers to redefine their own.

As Maureen and her husband, Bam, find themselves stuck in July's village for an indefinite amount of time, they realize that they have lost all ability to predict what might happen. When Bam attempts to prophesize what may happen now that the black revolution has apparently taken off, he realizes he cannot circumvent the language he used "back there," back when they were protected by their established home: "He struggled hopelessly for words that were not phrases from back there, words that would make the trust that must be forming here, out of blacks, out of themselves" (*July's People* 127). When living in their house, they had referred to these black South Africans living in the villages as examples of "'rural backwardness', 'counter-revolutionary pockets', 'failure to bring about peaceful change inevitably leading to civil war'" (127). These descriptions suggest that Bam found these villagers unable to evoke any kind of productive change. Perhaps he described them in this way to assure himself that revolution would never actually affect his life, which suggests a structuralist way of thinking—that life can be found in language alone.

As Maureen realizes that they are actually living amongst these "'counter-revolutionary pockets,'" however, she develops a post-structuralist way of thinking about life and language—that perhaps the experiences in the village *cannot* be explained through language. As Gordimer

quoted in “The Essential Gesture,” Barthes saw language “as an extreme limit” (410) and resisted the temptation to give text a meaning (Ungar 67). Maureen then realizes the limits that their past language held when trying to describe what might happen next in the village: “now it [these revolutions] had happened, it was an experience that couldn’t be forethought. Not with the means they had satisfied themselves with” (*July’s People* 127). Before, Maureen and Bam had satisfied their anxieties about a revolution by referring to the revolutionaries as “rural backwardness.” Maureen realizes, however, that now that she lives amongst these villagers, that whatever language she had previously used to describe them had been proven inaccurate. As a result, she realizes she needs to form a completely new vocabulary—a new definition—for July’s people. Even this new vocabulary, however, may fail to describe what will happen with the future revolutions. Evidently, language can neither be relied on to predict the future nor fully describe the emotions and tensions of the period.

In both novels, Rosa and Maureen begin to accept that their accustomed language used when describing apartheid has been proven insufficient. Instead of relying on a flow of terms frequently used in their past conversations, both of Gordimer’s characters embark on discovering how to adequately describe what is happening during apartheid, particularly after they experience the anti-apartheid movements. However, neither character accomplishes this task; neither successfully moves past the struggle to find new words. These novels reveal that descriptions of apartheid through *only* protesting language cannot provide complete descriptions of reality.

How, then, may Gordimer have wanted her readers to comprehend her texts? Gordimer resists the idea that meaning can be found only through language and has criticized the protest writer who has so clearly inserted his intentions in his works. These ideas are very similar to

Barthes' theories of language and the role of the author as defined in "The Death of the Author," in which we have already read about the role of the reader. In his essay, Barthes also argues that "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing...when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained'—victory to the critic"

(3). Barthes resists looking for the meaning of the word through assumptions of the author.

Focusing on the author of a text limits the reader's interpretation of the language, so that the reader only searches for what the author means. The reader must stop associating meanings of words with the author's intention and instead find the meaning by what has only been described in the text. And so, according to Barthes, "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the author" (4). The reader is able to comprehend the unity of text he or she is presented with only once he or she stops considering the intentions of the author. In literature written by protest writers, however, the intentions are clear before the piece is even read, and as Barthes would assume, the reader would fail to create their own new identity and instead pick up the writer's. In Gordimer's novels, however, the characters cannot determine an adequate language—reality is too complex to accurately define, so that the characters, and therefore the readers, must rely on their own reflections to make sense of the world.

II. *Relationships*: A New Identity for New Relationships

As introduced earlier, both Rosa and Maureen thought of themselves to be sympathetic whites to the atrocities of apartheid—Rosa growing up in a communist anti-apartheid household and Maureen treating her servant, July, with respect and compassion. Whatever their backgrounds, Rosa and Maureen soon discover that they cannot closely identify with black South Africans until they accurately identify their perceptions from the past—supporting Gordimer's frame of

reflection rather than projection. As Rosa interacts with black South African anti-apartheid activists, she soon learns that her identity as a communist white means nothing in the eyes of black South Africans. When listening to a conversation of her father's black acquaintances, Rosa listens to one of them say: "The Blackman is not fighting for equality with whites. Blackness is the Blackman refusing to believe the Whiteman's way of life is best for blacks" (*Burger's Daughter* 163).¹¹ According to these activists, Rosa must accept the rejection of white activists by blacks. As she interacts more and more with these black oppositionists, she realizes:

Whites, not blacks, are ultimately responsible for everything blacks suffer and hate, even at the hands of their own people; a white must accept this if he concedes any responsibility at all. If he feels guilty, he is a liberal; in that house where I grew up there was no guilt because it was believed it was as a ruling class and not a colour that whites assumed responsibility. It wasn't something bleached into the flesh. (161)

Rosa soon discovers that these white activists became involved with anti-apartheid efforts by changing the line of oppression. Rather than a racial struggle, Rosa's father and the other white members of this oppositional organization saw apartheid as a "ruling class," political struggle because as communists; they fought to resist capitalism and its resulting inequality in society. This redefinition allowed the white activists to identify and fight alongside black South Africans. Through the words of this black oppositionist, however, Gordimer explains how many black anti-apartheid revolutionists would not accept any white definition since it was, in fact, *white*. According to these black South Africans and the efforts put forth by Steve Biko, apartheid

¹¹ This statement refers heavily to the ideas of Steve Biko's Black Consciousness and positions the white reader in a conversation extremely prevalent during the time *Burger's Daughter* was published. In his 1971 book, *I Write What I Like*, Biko calls for a rejection of the white's way of life: "Blacks no longer seek to reform the system because so doing implies acceptance of the major points around which the system revolves. Blacks are out to completely transform the system and to make of it what they wish" (49).

remained a race distinction. As a result, Rosa must learn to be aware of the realities of her relationships during apartheid. Additionally, Rosa presents the reader with an example of someone accepting the Black Consciousness as a way of thinking, recognizing that regardless of the guilt and actions taken on by liberal whites, the white South Africans as a whole have been responsible for apartheid.

Rosa's perceptions do not change, however, until she finally escapes South Africa on a forged passport and runs into her black childhood friend in England. Bassie, a black South African who had been taken in by Rosa's family as a child until the government forced their ultimate separation, reacts coldly when he hears her call out his name. Later that night, Rosa wakes up to a phone call from Bassie, which he begins: "I'm not 'Bassie,' I'm Zwelinzima Vulindlela... You know what my name means, Rosa?...Zwel-in-zima. That's my name.

'Suffering land'" (*Burger's Daughter* 318). According to "Bassie" or "Zelinzima," Rosa never understood his identity. His name, meaning 'suffering land' relays the pain felt by his family in South Africa. By explaining the origins of his name, Bassie intends to reveal the racial and cultural differences between the two of them. When Rosa then asks why he called, he cuts her off: "I'm not your Bassie, just don't go thinking about that little kid who lived with you, don't think of that black 'brother', that's all" (321). Rosa can no longer identify Bassie as the boy in their childhood interactions, as she realizes that she barely knew his true identity at all.

According to Bassie, Rosa's inability to distinguish her childhood perception of him from her adult perception is the reason he can no longer interact with her. Rosa failed to identify him separately from her childhood perception. Even when Rosa explains that she has been actively trying to help the anti-apartheid activists, Bassie shoots back, "So what is that for me?...Whites are locking up blacks every day. You want to make the big confession?—why do

you think you should be different from all the other whites who've been shitting on us ever since they came?" (*Burger's Daughter* 322). For Bassie, there is no longer a distinction between whites that fight against apartheid and whites that support it. Therefore, Bassie finishes his conversation by telling Rosa, "I don't know who you are. You hear me, Rosa? You didn't even know my name" (322). And so, although Rosa had been engaging with her father's fellow activists once she had left her home, she had yet to fully reevaluate her perceptions of the deep-rooted consequences of apartheid. She realizes this only once Bassie points out that regardless of her interactions with these anti-apartheid activists, she has not actually contributed to their efforts. Furthermore, she failed to acknowledge who Bassie had become and had only assumed that he would have the same perceptions of her that he had in the past. Through Bassie, Gordimer creates a situation where the white race must learn that what they have done—any resistance they may have exhibited against apartheid—is not enough. Instead, reflections and reevaluations of past behaviors and opinions must take place in order to effectively project change for the future.

In *July's People*, Maureen already sees herself as separate from the villagers when she first arrives, unlike Rosa in *Burger's Daughter* who only realized the differences between white and black activists once a black South African activist declared that the Blackman refuses "to believe the Whiteman's way of life is best for blacks" (*Burger's Daughter* 163). When Maureen first arrives at July's village, she separates herself from the practices of the village people. For example, when Bam and Maureen must bathe for the first time, she heats the water from the river before bathing herself while her husband "took a chance and washed in the river—all these East flowing rivers carried the risk of bilharzia infection" just as the villagers did (*July's People* 9). However, Maureen soon identifies with the female villagers as both a woman and a mother. For

example, when her child falls ill, Maureen provides the child with the same medicine that the village mothers give their children. July, however, still sees Maureen as his white mistress and immediately protests the use of the black village's medicine. July immediately informs Maureen, "It's—you know...It's not for white people" (60). Although Maureen seems willing to accept July's wife's advice, responding: "Ju-ly...your baby is given it. Don't tell me it can do any harm," July then undermines the knowledge of his village's women. He responds, "What do they know, these farm women? They believe anything. When I'm sick, you send me to the hospital in town. When you see me take this African medicine?" (60) The differences between blacks and whites is so ingrained that even July does not trust his people in regards to his health. Maureen, on the other hand, identifies with the black mothers, trusting what they give their children in order to cure her own and believing that the nurturing aspect of motherhood falls across both races.

Maureen's identification with the black mothers leads her to inquire how she acted towards July while he was working in her home. Maureen confronts July for thinking of the black race as inferior when she questions July about how she treated him. She acknowledges she makes mistakes and when asking whether she treated him "inconsiderately," July tells her to not think about him. According to July, thinking about him is the role of "the master" (*July's People* 71). Maureen protests: "*The master*. Bam's not your master. Why do you pretend? Nobody's ever thought of you as anything but a grown man...You worked for me every day. I got on your nerves. So what. You got on mine. That's how people are" (71). While July refers to Bam still as his master, even in his own village, Maureen refers to Bam as a fellow person—he has never been anything less than "a grown man."

III. *Projection Through Reflection: Looking Back to Move Forward*

Although Maureen and Rosa similarly begin to redefine their language, reflecting on their past beliefs to re-identify their attitudes, Maureen is able to relate to July in a new way, apart from their master-servant relationship, while Rosa only changes once Bassie rejects her. Because Maureen connects with the village women both as females and as mothers, Maureen finds herself asking July about her past, acknowledging that she may have treated him “inconsiderately” (*July’s People* 71) Rosa, on the other hand, only learns from Conrad and realizes from her father’s biographer that she has never fully understood the situation in South Africa. As a result, when she finds Bassie in England, she perceives him just as she did when she was a child. Bassie wanted her to ask his name, about what he has done, and acknowledge the story of his father’s death. As soon as he points this out to her, however, she realizes the changes she needs to make.

Rosa and Maureen both come to realize that they can no longer predict what may happen in the future, that their preconceived definitions of black South Africans does not actually tell them what they may expect. Instead, they begin to reflect on what they have done in the past to help the oppressed races, realizing they had never fully understood the black South Africans they interacted with. Gordimer’s novels focus on redefining past attitudes rather than setting an agenda for the future. In fact, both novels end with completely ambiguous futures for the women: Rosa is locked in a political prison unsure of when she will be released, and Maureen is running through a forest towards an unknown helicopter, unsure of what fate the helicopter will bring.

Nadine Gordimer ends these novels with a sense of uncertainty rather than an agenda: the reader must determine his or her own ending. As introduced through Roland Barthes’ theories, Gordimer looked to remove herself from the novels, revealing how the reader rather than the

author defines the novels. Fitting with the last scenes of these novels, Gordimer allows the tension between what is known and unknown to create the imagination she wishes to provoke in the readers. Furthermore, her novels can come across as *difficult* to read. This tension and difficulty are relevant reflections of Theodor Adorno's literary theories. Why is this? In the next chapter, I explore the difficulties of her novels as well as the opinions expressed in her essays, which offer another example of Gordimer's writing as resonating with the literary standards set forth by these theorists of language and its politics.

Chapter Two

Recognition Through the Personal Rather than the Political

Along with focusing on the redefinition of language and reevaluating relationships, Gordimer also structured her *style* of writing to challenge the reader, denying the reader of a purely pleasurable experience. Many moments in her novels are difficult to follow as Andrew Ettin explains in his book, *Betrays of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer*: “In her writing...*descriptive* in fact rarely means *pictorial*. We may get to know, through occasional details, something of what a character looks like or wears, and we will get rather more of the physical makeup of rooms or natural settings, but the work rarely seems to pause while the author describes a picture for us” (41). This chapter will reveal the effect of this oblique writing as explained by Theodor Adorno’s theories on the commitment of art and the effects of the negative dialectic. According to Adorno, “art is the negative knowledge of the actual world” (“Reconciliation Under Duress” 160). Rather, art explores what is *not* known and as Adorno explains, “art does not become knowledge with reference to mere immediate reality” (159). Throughout her novels, Gordimer avoids references to the “immediate reality.” As Ettin explains, we never get a full picture of the plot and instead the reader must orient himself by considering what has *not* been said. As Gordimer draws on the theories of Adorno, she portrays the strong appeal of this German, Jewish theorist, further distancing herself from the genre of black authors and redefining the objective of a political novel.

As a Jew living in Germany, Adorno’s personal experiences with oppression are particularly relevant when analyzing Gordimer’s turn to her aesthetic techniques rather than to the protest writers. Because of the journalistic circles within which he worked, Adorno was repeatedly informed that as a Jew he should consider emigrating as the National Socialist Party rose in power. Regardless, he remained in Germany, pursuing his career as a journalist under a

fake name.¹² In his biography of Adorno, Stefan Müller-Doohm reveals that Adorno rarely included his disapproval of Germany's politics in his pieces of literature (Müller-Doohm 181). Müller-Doohm continues to reveal that Adorno refrained from direct criticism even in his private letters, finding in his letters “no more than rather generalized, pessimistic mood-pictures, and no unambiguous statements on the political situation” (181). Instead, Adorno looked to the ambiguity found in the aesthetic. In his 1932 essay, “On the Social Situation of Music,” Adorno writes,

It is not for music to stare in helpless horror at society: it fulfills its social function more precisely when it presents social problems through its own material and according to its own formal laws—problems which music contains within itself in the innermost cells of its technique. (*Essays on Music* 433)¹³

The idea that art can address social problems in “the innermost cells of its technique” acknowledges the significant political and social influence of finely crafted art. Music, as well as literature, does not need to be obviously political in order to address society's political issues. And as this chapter will reveal, the indirectness by which Adorno incorporated the political into literature echoes the same indirectness that Gordimer accomplishes in her novels.

As explained in the introduction, protest literature became a central tool for anti-apartheid resistance efforts. Nadine Gordimer responded to this development in a 1965 interview with *London Magazine*, in which she countered the effects of protest literature:

¹² As Stefan Müller-Dohm explains in *Adorno: A Biography*, Adorno chose the name Hektor Rottweiler because “Rottweiler was a typical butcher's dog and was almost always called Hektor. It was a fearsome beast and so no Nazi will ever suspect that it might hide the identity of a non-Aryan writer” (Müller-Dohm 180). His reasoning for selecting this name reveals how Adorno would sacrifice his identity to continue writing, rather than *using* his identity as a reason to write like the protest writers in South Africa.

¹³ Also quoted in Müller-Dohm's *Adorno: A Biography*, 181.

I think the protest can only be as good as the writing...Does 'effective' mean the same as 'good', in this context? I take it that it does, since the effectiveness—in any terms of provoking direct action, bringing about change in legislation—of any protest literature is surely doubtful. If effectiveness is measured by whether or not a novel...makes people doubt, where they were complacent, then I should say that within South Africa itself, protest literature has made little mark, although it is widely read among white people. They seem to read it as if it were all happening somewhere else, to some other people.

("A Writer in South Africa" 36)

Here Gordimer states that protest literature has neither accomplished legislative change nor shifts in perceptions of the white readers. Gordimer gave this interview during high-apartheid, before blacks had largely organized resistance amongst themselves, and so her comment that "protest literature has made little mark" is historically accurate. Furthermore, Gordimer touches on how protest literature has failed to influence white readers to promote change during apartheid; they have not internalized what they have read. "Good" literature, according to Gordimer, can then be classified according to whether or not it is "effective"—has the writing made people doubt their opinions, for example? In this interview, Gordimer reveals that the political influence of a novel depends largely on the quality of the novel. How, then, does Gordimer define and create "good", effective literature?

Continuing in her 1965 interview, Gordimer sets up her two approaches to literature in South Africa during apartheid, one of which included opposing European literary critic Jean-Paul Sartre's theories on the meaning of literature, particularly when literature is directed at pursuing human

freedom.¹⁴ When asked whether there was a difference between her role as a writer in South Africa and as a person, Gordimer answered: “Unlike Sartre, I believe a ‘writer’s morality’ is valid, and the temptation to put one’s writing at the service of a cause—whether it is fighting the colour bar or the ‘momentary renunciation of literature in order to educate the people,’ etc—is a betrayal” (“A Writer in South Africa” 34). According to Gordimer, producing fiction for a specific purpose, such as South African protest literature, undermines the quality of the novel. In an earlier 1961 interview, when asked about the quality of African literature and whether it will improve as the tensions surrounding apartheid grow, Gordimer answered: “Novelty of subject-matter or point of view may give a fillip to mediocre writing, but the truly creative imagination is not dependent on the novelties, but the on the deep underlying sameness of all human experience” (Sachs 8). Essentially, Gordimer argues that to produce quality literature during political upheaval, the writer cannot write with the objective to influence that political situation in a specific way. Instead, as political tensions rise, writers must focus on understanding and portraying fundamental human experiences and emotions in order to create an aesthetical work which can then be interpreted politically.

I. Evoking the Sense of Recognition

Returning to the challenges faced by Gordimer’s readers, we look to how Gordimer incorporates experiences that the characters must confront that are recognizable to the reader. These

¹⁴ Here Gordimer opposes Jean-Paul Sartre, a 1964 recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, who claimed in his 1948 essay, “What is Literature?” that “literature is no longer an activity for itself, nor primarily descriptive of characters and situations, but is concerned with human freedom and its (and the author’s) commitment”—as summarized in his Nobel Prize biography (“Jean-Paul Sartre—Biography”). Evidently, Gordimer opposes this commitment as she sees it leading to “putting one’s writing at the service of a cause.” As will be revealed in this chapter, Sartre was also pivotal for Adorno’s theories, as Adorno also formed some of his most relevant theories in opposition to Sartre’s.

recognizable moments allow the reader to identify with the character regardless of what has been experienced before or after these moments. And as will be revealed, these moments provoke shifts in the reader's attitudes, rather than the direct political action aspired to by the protest writers, and connect strongly to the theories of Adorno.

In *July's People*, Gordimer incorporates common, personal experiences within which the reader can recognize his or her self. These experiences are often viewed as private and intimate, yet Gordimer incorporates them as a pivotal way in revealing the similarities found in all South Africans while also questioning whether these similarities can even be assumed in light of the political circumstances.

For example, when Maureen first arrives in the village, she refuses to wash in the river out of fear of infection—even though that was common practice amongst the villagers. She changes her mind, however, once she has to confront the conditions of the village women:

Already she [Maureen] had been, with the modesty and sense of privacy that finds the appropriate expression in every community, secretly down to the river to wash a set of bloody rags. She had no thought for the risk of bilharzia as she scrubbed against a stone and watched the flow of her time, measuring off another month, curl like red smoke borne away in the passing of the river. (67)

After spending a few days in the village, Maureen no longer distinguishes her feminine practices from the black women of the village. Furthermore, Gordimer refers to the sense of modesty and privacy as something found “in every community,” pushing the universality of this experience. Similarly to Maureen giving her children local village medicine for treatment, described in the previous chapter, she now bathes in the river like the village women do, heeding no thought to

bilharzia. In this scene, Gordimer expresses a universality of human need felt across races when placed in the same circumstances.

The universality of human need is not only suggested at a physical level but also an emotional one. As Maureen sees more of July and his wife's relationship, she begins to wonder about the woman she knew July met with often when he was in town working for Maureen. While wondering whether or not July would have wanted to bring this woman back to the village permanently, Gordimer narrates:

The humane creed (Maureen, like anyone else, regarded her own as definitive) depended on validities staked on a belief in the absolute nature of intimate relationships between human beings. If people don't all experience emotional satisfaction and deprivation in the same way, what claim can there be for the equality of need? (*July's People* 64)

Maureen, as a white liberal, believes that all humans, regardless of race, embrace their emotions "in the same way." Upon defining her human creed, which she then applies universally, Maureen must question whether July and Maureen *do* apply to the same human setting. Would July have brought back this town woman if his circumstances under apartheid were to change? Maureen believes that that there is this "absolute nature of intimate relationships between human beings." What might it mean, however, if people do *not* experience their emotions "in the same way?" Maureen believes that an "equality of need" exists among humans because she assumes all people experience their "satisfaction and deprivation in the same way." Gordimer, however, raises general questions about whether or not humans really do have this same creed through the mystery of July's decision about his town woman. While Maureen reasons that all humans

believe in love and crave intimate relationships, regardless of circumstance, Gordimer raises the question of human *need* in general, rather than questions of equality.

As seen in these examples, Gordimer communicates human experiences without being overtly political. Intimate human experiences—from sexual thoughts to menstrual cycles—are not left out of her novels, as all are part of universal human experiences. Gordimer continues to oppose the focus of protest literature during apartheid in her 1982 essay, “Living in the Interregnum,” an essay in which she draws on Adorno to *narrow* the degree of personal experiences that should be incorporated into political fiction. Although Gordimer has stated that the protest author’s reliance on his novelty of personal experiences is not sufficient for well-written literature, she evidently does not completely reject the use of these personal moments, as we have just read some of her examples. In fact, Gordimer especially calls on these personal moments when writing in this interregnum—as revolutions increase and the Afrikaner political party begins to accept that apartheid may come to an end—as she continues to explain in her essay. Gordimer takes her definition of ‘interregnum’ from Italian political activist Antonio Gramsci, who wrote of Italy’s political crisis in the early twentieth-century: “The old is dying, and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms” (qtd in “Living in the Interregnum, 375). Gordimer uses this description to orient the objective of her writing:

In this interregnum, I and all my countrymen and women are living. I am going, quite frequently, to let events personally experienced as I was thinking towards or writing this paper interrupt theoretical flow, because this interaction—this essential disruption, this breaking in upon the existential coherence we call concept—is the very state of being I must attempt to convey (375).

Essentially, Gordimer suggests that there are these moments, no matter how theoretical or political one is being, that must be interrupted by personal experiences. Personal experiences must never be lost when listening to official South African language and declarations; with these personal experiences, one can begin to find the reality in what is being said. Gordimer then turns to Adorno, however, to clarify that these moments cannot just be personal to the *writer*.

In her essay, “Living in the Interregnum,” Gordimer relies on Adorno’s approach of the incorporation of personal experiences, stressing that personal experiences cannot be assumed to shape an entire society’s culture. Gordimer writes, “I have shunned the arrogance of interpreting my country through the private life that, as Theodor Adorno puts it, ‘drags on only as an appendage of the social process’ in a time and place of which I am a part” (375-376). Gordimer refers to Adorno’s chapter on “Cultural Criticism and Society,” in which Adorno states that culture has become “the sphere of private life.” As a result, according to Adorno, “the illusory importance and autonomy of private life conceals the fact that private life drags on only as an appendage of the social process” (30). Essentially, Adorno believes that too much emphasis has been placed on the experiences of private life when representing culture; culture cannot be defined by the intimate experiences of just a few writers. In regards to protest writers during apartheid, these writers have relied too heavily on depicting their personal stories without connecting them to the greater audience. Therefore, Gordimer has avoided depicting the situation in South Africa in her novels through her personal point of view. This is most evident in *July’s People* as the novel is set in an imaginary future—envisioning what *may* happen if the country broke out into civil war. Rather than portraying South Africa according to *her* experiences, Gordimer portrays South Africa under circumstances that have not even occurred.

Gordimer continues to echo Adorno's ideas of private life in her essay "Living in the Interregnum" when claiming that the quality of literature produced by black authors has been compromised by their reliance on their private experiences. She writes that black writers "began to show blacks that their living conditions *are* their story" (386). However, the reliance on their living conditions to provide material for their writing ended up losing the white audience, according to Gordimer. As she explains,

The reason for the difficulty, even boredom, many whites experience when reading stories or watching plays by blacks in which, as they say, 'nothing happens', is that the experience conveyed is not 'the development of actions' but 'the representation of conditions', a mode of artistic revelation and experience for those in whose life dramatic content is in its conditions. (387)

We see Ndebele actually encouraging this "representation of conditions," in his 1984 essay, which calls for the dramatization of apartheid's brutal system, finding the protest writer's story in the "hypocrisy of the liberals" and the writer's own experiences of exploitation ("The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" 48). White readers felt no connection to these stories, however—the stories of oppression became distant occurrences experienced only by black South Africans. Therefore, we see in Gordimer's novels a turn to experiences experienced by *all* humans, experiences not limited by race so that these readers could begin to recognize and identify with the characters in the stories.

Before moving any further into the discussion of how Gordimer appeals to Adorno's theories, it is worth exploring more closely what she means by "recognition" as part of the experience she wants to cultivate in her readers. Gordimer, through a variety of methods, has written in a way that the reader may identify with the characters through "recognition" of his or

her own experiences. This recognition can theoretically create a sense of reflection in the reader, so that he may change his own political attitudes. This is an argument made by Rita Felski's in her 2008, *Uses of Literature* in which she defines the idea of recognition in relation to her own experience of reading:

While turning a page I am arrested by a compelling description, a constellation of events, a conversation between characters, an interior monologue. Suddenly and without warning, a flash of connection leaps across the gap between text and reader...I may be for looking for such a moment, or I may stumble on it haphazardly...In either case, I feel myself addressed, summoned, called to account: I cannot help seeing traces of myself in the pages I am reading. Indisputably, something has changed; my perspective has shifted. I see something that I did not see before. (23)

Recognition, in this sense, leads to a shift in perspective in the readers—seeing something not seen before. This shift in perspective as a result of the recognition in literary works leads to changes in the reader's attitude *and* understanding of a situation. Felski continues by describing how the characters evoke this shift: “Novels yield up manifold descriptions of such moments of readjustment, as fictional readers are wrenched out of their circumstances by the force of written words” (23). Felski acknowledges, however, the difference in recognition's definition as interpreted by literary theorists and political theorists. In literary terms, recognition becomes self-reflective. Felski writes, “Recognition...refers to a cognitive insight, a moment of knowing or knowing again...The ideas at play here have to do with comprehension, insight, and self-understanding” (29). For literary theorists, recognition is “directed toward the self.” Political theorists, however, find a different response from recognition: for political theorists, recognition does not mean “knowledge, but acknowledgement” (29). Whereas literary recognition results in

“comprehension, insight, and self-understanding,” political recognition calls for “acceptance, dignity and inclusion in public life...a call for justice rather than a claim to truth.” In this sense, political recognition is directed “toward others,” rather than the self (30).

This kind of political recognition has clearly had a role to play in the creation of post-apartheid South Africa. Gordimer stresses this when she explains that: “In the eyes of the black majority which will rule a new South Africa, whites of former South Africa will have to redefine themselves in a new collective life within new structures” (“Living in the Interregnum” 376). Based on the expectations of black protest writers, white readers will need to accept a new public life according to the demands of black South Africans. As Gordimer structures her novels, however, this “new collective life” is found in the shared personal experiences of characters, regardless of race. These experiences of recognition and re-evaluation by the protagonists encourage the reader to identify with these changes. Evidently, Gordimer calls for literary recognition whereas the protest writers call for only political. As Ettin writes about Gordimer’s novels,

The frequency with which her characters, throughout her career, leave, come back, flee into exile, or are in prison at the end implies how tension-laden the attachments to home, to Africa, are. But so are all close attachments, within which we make lives of sensual experience, attempt to communicate with one another, fail and are failed through secrets and deceptions, and dwell inside our anxieties about home and family relations. We live, her work suggests, perplexed by strangeness to one another and ourselves, seeking our native land, our home. (59)

He interprets central themes in Gordimer’s novels—“sensual [experiences],” “[attempts] to communicate with one another,” “anxieties about home and family relations,”—as reflections of

human nature and supporting how recognition can be found by the readers while reading her works. Personal experiences, such as those with oppression, must be balanced out with an appeal to a greater identity—moments that are not only personal to Gordimer or the protest writers, but also personal to human beings in general.

II. The Negative Dialectic in the Wake of Recognition

In the absence of these personal experiences, Gordimer's novels are difficult to read; recognition can be hard to find. Often times, the reader is unsure of the plot development and must figure out who is speaking, where the action takes place, and the direction of the plot. In effect, the written word cannot always explicitly reveal what develops, as suggested in the first chapter when discussing the limitations of language.

What follows is an interaction between Conrad and Rosa in *Burger's Daughter* where the reader feels lost, unaware of who is speaking and how the topics develop:

The cat she [Rosa] had brought with her skittered among the loose sheets of his

[Conrad's] thesis buried under Sunday papers. –Shall I put these somewhere safe or put the cat out?–

They both laughed at the question implied. The room filled up with his books and papers, his Spanish grammars, his violin and musical scores, records, but in this evidence of activity he lay smoking, often sleeping. She read, repaired her clothes, and wandered in the wilderness outside from which she collected branches, pampas grass feathers, fir cones, and once gardenias that heavy rain had brought back into bloom from the barrenness of neglect.

Sometimes he was not asleep when he appeared to be.—What was your song?—

—Song?—Squatting on the floor cleaning up crumbs of bark and broken leaf.

—You were singing.—

—What? Was I?— She had filled a dented Benares brass pot with loquat
branches.

—For the joy of living.—

She looked to see if he were making fun of her. —I didn't know.—

—But you never doubted it for a moment. Your family.—

She did not turn to him that profile of privacy with which he was used to meeting. —Suppose
not.—

—Disease, drowning, arrests, imprisonments.—He opened his eyes, almond
shaped and glazed, from ostentatious supine vulnerability. —It didn't make any
difference.—

—I haven't thought about it. No. In the end, no difference.— An embarrassed,
almost prim laugh. —We were not the only people alive.—She sat on the floor with her
feet under her body, thighs sloping forward to the knees, her hands caught between them.
—I am the only person alive.—

She could have turned him away, glided from the territory with the kind of
comment that comes easily: How modestly you dispose of the rest of us (41).

This scene progresses from a significant lack of context—emerging only from a brief narrative
about Conrad's Spanish lessons and their routine of using the shared living room. Yet Gordimer
structures a dialogue about Rosa's family—about the joy they may or may not have experienced
in their lifetime—around a conversation of singing, cleaning, and both Conrad and Rosa's living
habits. Furthermore, this conversation has no clear indication of who speaks when; the reader

must carefully read through the dialogue to follow. The reader can only assume that Rosa was singing a song with lyrics that perhaps reflected her family's experiences. Rosa, however, is unaware of her singing, suggesting that words can reflect reality and emotions most accurately when they are not *purposefully* used. Rosa can only voice her emotions when she is not consciously thinking of them; her sub-consciousness expresses her emotions more articulately than she can.

In this above scene, Conrad interrupts her singing, asking whether or not the “disease, drowning, arrests, [and] imprisonments” affected her ability to enjoy life. At this point, although the reader may have been lost in the beginning of the scene, as it jumped from one subject to the next, the reader's confusion comes to an end when Rosa responds, “I haven't thought about it. No. In the end, no difference,” which she follows with an “embarrassed, almost prim laugh.” The reader becomes fully aware of Rosa's discomfort about never having paid attention to the happiness of her family. Furthermore, the reader becomes fully immersed in her emotions when Gordimer brings the reader into Rosa's thoughts: frustration that she cannot tell Conrad how she feels, how “modestly he disposes” of her and her family. Gordimer invites the reader's participation during these challenging moments right when the character must actively consider her own attitudes, encouraging the reader's own attitudinal shift.

The reader also faces difficulty navigating the dialogue in *July's People*, finding himself unaware of whose opinions he is reading and unable to decipher the explicit opinions of Gordimer. The relationship between Maureen and July is especially difficult to comprehend as Gordimer resists defining it. Gordimer writes,

His chin was raised, trying to sense rather than see if Bam was in the hut behind. Her silence was the answer: not back; they both knew the third one had gone off, early, to

shoot some meat—a family of wart-hogs had been rashly coming to an old wallow within sight of the settlement. He stood there, his stolidity an acceptance that he could not escape her, since she was alone, they were one-to-one; hers an insinuated understanding that she had not refused to come to him but wanted them to meet where no one else would judge them. The subtlety of it was nothing new. People in the relation they had been in are used to having to interpret what is never said, between them. (69)

What is the “relation they had been in”? A master-servant relationship? Or something more?

Above is another example of how Nadine Gordimer does not write her novels in a simple language—emotions, tensions, and opinions are not often defined. The nature of this interaction between Maureen and July—the “subtlety of it”—leaves the reader wondering what “it” consists of. According to John Cooke, author of *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes*, some critics did not agree with this ambiguous style of writing: “Gordimer also attracted some hostile criticism. Typically reviewers commented adversely on her lack of narrative muscle” (16). However, through this “lack of narrative muscle” and as the readers are challenged to understand the direction of the novel, Gordimer accomplishes a shift in the focus of her novels away from the political background and onto the nature of relationships. The reader is then left trying to follow the development of the plots rather than reading the explicit opinions of Gordimer.

In her essay “A Writer’s Freedom,” Gordimer revealed the pressure felt by protest writers to serve as the “mouthpiece” of the oppressed, publishing what they cannot say themselves (230). In these excerpts, however, we see Gordimer avoiding the pressures placed on protest writers: relationships, meaning, and emotions are all open to interpretation rather than serving a political purpose. And in order to understand the effects of this non-clarity, we turn to Adorno’s

theories on the commitment of literature, in which he describes the limitations of a writer by also rejecting Sartre's interpretations of the meaning of literature.

In his essay 'Commitment,' drafted between 1961 and 1969, Adorno criticizes Sartre's essay on the meaning of literature just as Gordimer had done in her 1965 essay. Sartre writes, "The writer deals with meanings," to which Adorno answers, "Certainly, but not only with meanings. Although no word that enters into a work of literature divests itself fully of the meanings it possess in communicative speech, still, in no work, not even the traditional novel, does this meaning remain untransformed: it is not the same meaning the word had outside the work" (2). In Adorno's terms, the absolute meaning of literature cannot be defined because meaning is *never* constant—language changes meaning when in speech and the written word. The meaning of the written word is then left up to the reader rather than the author, as Adorno continues, "The subject matter of a philosophy of art, such as even Sartre intends it, is not its journalistic aspect" (3). Essentially, literature is not to be valued by its ability to chronicle reality, as literature can never have a constant meaning. If literature's meaning *is* assumed to be constant, then Adorno argues that the intention of the work merely turns into an ideology that the reader either accepts or rejects:

Literature that exists for the human being, like committed literature but also like the kind of literature the moral philistine wants, betrays the human being by betraying what could help him only if it did not act as though it were doing so. But anything that made itself absolute in response, existing only for its own sake, would degenerate into ideology. (18)

When Gordimer analyzed protest literature, she commented on how it was only a representation of conditions of black South Africans, conditions from which the white readers could separate themselves. In this above quotation by Adorno, as well as in Gordimer's previous comments,

Adorno explains that when the intention of a piece of literature is so clear—when literature “exists for the human being”—literature actually fails in influencing the reader. In other words, if literature is obviously created to expose the horrors of apartheid, then these horrors would just be seen as the assumed result of apartheid rather than real-life experiences, failing to attract the commitment of the reader to change.

We see Gordimer continue to exemplify Adorno’s theories on commitment by also resisting any kind of journalistic standard in her novels. For example, after Conrad tells Rosa that life does not exist in words, he then continues to tell Rosa that sex and death are the *only* realities, an idea repeated throughout *Burger’s Daughter* (47, 135). For example, shortly after Conrad states this idea, Gordimer describes what the reader can presume to be a sexual affair without ever mentioning the word sex when she concludes the chapter:

He threw back the covers and they watched the silhouettes of their waving feet, wagging like tongues, talking like hands. Soon they got up and began to dance in the dark, their shapes flying and entangling, a jiggling and thumping and whirling, a giggling, gasping as mysterious as the movement of rats on the rafters, or the swarming of bees, taking shelter under the tin roof. (53)

Even sex, one of the only realities according to Conrad, cannot be described by one word. Therefore, something as complex as apartheid proves difficult to write about, since its realities are difficult to convey through language alone. And so, to what objective should these writers commit?

In Adorno’s essay, published four years before *Burger’s Daughter*, Adorno defines the “commitment” in literature as the creation of a new attitude. Adorno states,

Committed art in the strict sense is not intended to lead to specific measures, legislative acts, or institutional arrangements...Instead, it works toward an attitude...The very thing that gives committed art an artistic advantage over the tendentious piece, however, makes the content to which the author is committed ambiguous. (4)

As Adorno explains, literature—in addition to all art—should not be created with a specific agenda or intention. Instead, art works to evoke changes in attitudes and emotions—feelings that are intrinsic and difficult to describe. According to Adorno, this means that the author's commitment to the actual content of the novel is “ambiguous,” and, as he continues to explain, “Art is not a matter of pointing up alternative but rather of resisting, solely through artistic form, the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings” (5). By this resistance, art addresses the present (reality) while slowing down to reflect on what exists rather than searching for an alternative world towards which society should be moving.

Neil Lazarus highlights the ambivalence of Adorno's theories in the relation to the direction that he saw white writers in South Africa writing towards in his 1986 essay, “Modernism and Modernity: T.W. Adorno and Contemporary White South African Literature.” He explains:

In contrast with the revolutionary idealism of much contemporary black South African theorizing, the openness to the future of white intellectuals begins to seem less like an openness than an ambivalence. The "world view" disclosed in their work is much closer to Adorno's defiant negativity than to the hope-filled optimism of black activists in South Africa. (146-147)

He finds that the distinction between white and black South African writers can be found in the ways by which they write about the prospects of change in South Africa—the ways by which

they are committed in their art form. While he makes his statements about all white South African authors, we read Gordimer drawing specifically on Adorno in her essay, “Living in the Interregnum,” affirming that she was very cognizant of Adorno’s theories and turned to them when creating her own artistic form. And as the previous chapter revealed, *Burger’s Daughter* and *July’s People* focus on the reevaluation and rediscovery of liberal white South Africans, rather than stirring up anger in the reader through explicit scenes of violence. As Etlin describes, “Her characters sometimes argue about doctrinal issues and fall out with one another over tactics and strategies, but we are always returned to how those disagreements, reassessments, and changes in hierarchy express themselves in the timing of a gesture, the phrasing of a remark, the qualities of sexual contact” (44). The disagreements and tensions are portrayed through these literary techniques, rather than by direct explanations; the politics faced by the characters are relayed through these aesthetic details rather than by a straightforward plot.

Returning to Adorno’s commitment theories, the “artistic advantage” in literature comes from this ambiguity. And we see Gordimer commit to this artistic advantage throughout her novels to the extent that she ends neither with a clear agenda. Maureen, for example, is last seen fleeing into the woods, chasing a helicopter with unknown occupants; in her mind they are either “saviours or murderers” and she does not stop to “identi[fy] the markings” (*July’s People* 158). Instead, “she runs” (160). Rosa, on the other hand, is last seen detained in a political prison in the aftermath of the Soweto revolts. Gordimer does not inform the reader of her fate.

Although Gordimer may create an uncomfortable reader experience by discussing intimate moments in the character’s lives, throwing the reader into scenes without any orientation and jumping from sources of dialogue, she allows the reader to interpret his or her own meaning of the novel. The reader is left wondering what may happen to the two female

characters, based on what he or she has discovered throughout the novel, rather than being told of their outcomes. And so, throughout her novels, we see Gordimer's commitment to the ambiguity of her novels, rather than the political. And yet, even in this ambiguous commitment, the reader is left challenging his or her own perceptions of the similarities, the recognitions, and the engrained differences across South Africa's races.

Chapter Three

Nadine Gordimer's Recognition by the Western Literary World

In this third chapter, Nadine Gordimer's political responsibilities will be reevaluated within the aesthetic commitments she has made. Although in the previous two chapters we have seen how Gordimer focuses heavily on the aesthetic nature of her novels, we cannot lose sight of the political responsibilities she inevitably felt. Although Gordimer spoke out against her novels being interpreted only as political pieces rather than quality pieces of fiction, she clearly turns to an *integration* of both aesthetics and politics—rather than a separation of the two—in order to create the influence of her novels. And as she explains in one essay, this integration may be inevitable.

In her essay “The Essential Gesture,” before drawing on Barthes' literary aesthetic techniques, Gordimer prioritizes and defines the responsibilities she has as a writer during this oppressive era. She begins the essay by stating, “Responsibility is what awaits outside the Eden of creativity” (409). Using this analogy, Gordimer explains that creativity in a writer first exists without responsibility—responsibility is not present in Eden, the writer's oasis. Instead, the author possesses an initial commitment to the aesthetic rather than the political. However, the oasis of Eden is eventually broken by responsibility, as Gordimer continues: “History evidences it. Sociology extracts it. The writer loses Eden, writes to be read and comes to realize that he is answerable” (409). In this statement, Gordimer stresses the inevitable penetration of politics in a writer's work. As the opening epigraph reveals, Gordimer believed herself to be a writer “before anything else.” She then explains, however, that “because the society in which I live is so permeated with politics, my work has become intimately connected with the translation of political events” (qtd in Servan-Schreiber 108). As her work takes on this role as a “translation of

political events” since politics in South Africa have infiltrated all aspects of society, she, as a writer, becomes “answerable” to her audience.

In many of her essays and novels, Gordimer has publicly acknowledged and exemplified her beliefs for the responsibility of a writer. As this chapter will reveal, the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Nadine Gordimer in 1991 granted Gordimer both the literary and political respect of the international community and serves as a symbol of acceptance of Gordimer’s approach to literature, especially in the Western literary world. In the past two chapters, we have seen how Gordimer works to integrate the aesthetic into her novels *Burger’s Daughter* and *July’s People*, calling on the reflection of her characters rather than the projection of a new political agenda. And as explained in the introduction, this indirectness is how Richard Hoggart defined value in literature: when literature “pursues its explorations with a disinterested passion (not wooing nor apologizing nor bullying)” (qtd in Cornwell, 51). Gordimer adapted this indirectness through her appeals to Roland Barthes and Theodor Adorno, focusing on the language and commitment to human experiences. Regardless of the detours Gordimer may have taken in her novels, compared to the focus of protest literatures, Gordimer was the first South African writer awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1991, suggesting that the Nobel Prize mandate also valued this indirectness. The announcement came just eight months after South Africa’s President F.W. de Klerk publicly announced to the world his plans to repeal the country’s apartheid segregation laws that had been in place since 1948 (*New York Times*). The awarding of the Nobel Prize, a Western European award, to a South African just after the president announced these repeals suggests a newfound acceptance of South Africa in the eyes of the international community.

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In the words of Alfred Nobel's will, the Nobel Prize is granted each year to individuals who have "conferred the greatest benefit on mankind." What does this benefit actually entail? The Nobel Prize has been awarded each year since 1901 to those who have bestowed this great "benefit" in the areas of physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, and peace amongst nations ("The Nobel Prizes"). The inclusion of literature as a category for the Nobel Prize highlights the perceived significance of literature in facilitating social change over the past century. Authors over the years have been rewarded not just for their aesthetic expertise, but also for the political significance of their novels, under the qualification that the prize shall be awarded "to the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction" ("The Nobel Prize in Literature"). The terms "greatest benefit on mankind" and "the most outstanding work in an ideal direction" portray a sense that the Nobel Prize is granted to those who move society *forward*. As seen in the following press releases for Nadine Gordimer's Nobel Prize, Gordimer was praised for her ability to separate politics from literature. The Prize also speaks, however, to her ability to "shape" the anti-apartheid process—suggesting her novels were actually seen as political even in light of her aesthetic commitments.

The Nobel Prize in Literature announced Gordimer as the recipient with the following press release, revealing the qualities of her work they most valued:

Gordimer writes with intense immediacy about the extremely complicated personal and social relationships in her environment. At the same time as she feels a political involvement - and takes action on that basis - she does not permit this to encroach on her writings. Nevertheless, her literary works, in giving profound insights into the historical process, help to shape this process. ("Nobel Prize in Literature 1991 – Press Release")

Here, the Nobel Prize committee praises Gordimer's balanced priorities when writing—that the responsibilities of a writer should influence a work only once the creative aspects have been discovered. The press release continues to state that Gordimer's works move society forward, that they “help to shape this process” of overcoming the “complicated personal and social relationships in her environment.” This designation supports one of the qualifications of the award: that it shall be granted to an individual who creates “the most outstanding work in an ideal direction” (“Nobel Prize in Literature 1991-Press Release”). While the Nobel Prize significantly praises Gordimer's aesthetic techniques, the award is not limited to only this recognition. The Nobel Prize committee also views her use of the aesthetic as fundamental for relaying the politics of her country. The Nobel Prize committee then uses this relation of politics found in her novels as working to move society *forward*. This designation, however, seems to contradict the theme of Gordimer's novels, as I have revealed that her characters focus on reflecting *back* on their previous uses of language, interactions, and identifications. Even though her novels are mainly reflective and Gordimer has denied her political objective, the Nobel Prize considers them politically projective—that her use of the aesthetic has, indeed, created an effective political work.

The Presentation Speech of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Literature, given by Professor Sture Allén, the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, echoes this press release by also praising Gordimer for this separation of her political and literary work and yet expands on this separation to state that her work still shapes the future of society. Professor Allén explains how Gordimer,

...[conveys] to the reader a powerful sense of authenticity, and with wide human relevance, she makes visible the extremely complicated and utterly inhuman living

conditions in the world of racial segregation. She feels political responsibility, and does not shy away from its consequences, but will not allow it to affect her as a writer: her texts are not agitatorial, not progandistic. Still, her works and the deep insights she offers contribute to shaping reality. (Nobelprize.org)

Professor Allén also highlights Gordimer's ability to separate her political responsibility from her authorial's. While Allén makes sure to point out the aesthetic qualities of Gordimer's work, she brings the praise back to the effect Gordimer's novels have had on society. Gordimer responds, however, by continuing to restrict the ability of literature to directly evoke change in society—just as she resisted in her previous essays.

In her Nobel Prize acceptance lecture, Gordimer maintains that literature cannot fully encapsulate reality in part because literature cannot hold any constant meaning—an idea that we have seen Adorno develop. She denies the idea that her novels had such an instructional effect, reminding the audience: “Reality is constructed out of many elements and entities, seen and unseen, expressed, and left unexpressed for breathing-space in the mind” (“Nadine Gordimer - Nobel Lecture”). Literature, therefore, cannot be assigned the role of inspiring a new world because, as Gordimer continues, “Life is aleatory in itself; being is constantly pulled and shaped this way and that by circumstances and different levels of consciousness. There is no pure state of being, and it follows that there is no pure text, ‘real’ text, totally incorporating the aleatory.” Literature, therefore, cannot be credited with shaping reality, since reality, essentially, holds no concrete shape. Gordimer concludes her Nobel Lecture by explaining her position as a writer and how to most effectively influence the audience: “The life, the opinions, are not the work, for it is in the tension between standing apart and being involved that the imagination transforms both.” In essence, a writer does not create a piece of literature merely by recounting their experiences.

Instead, Gordimer dedicates herself to this tension—“standing apart and being involved”—in order to write what will engage the audience. The imagination, the audience investing themselves in the story, is what brings about the changes in life and opinions.

Although the Nobel Prize in Literature strongly values the literary qualities of a writer, Gordimer feels the need to remind her audience in her acceptance lecture that the best political literature is the most well written literature. She calls on Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Colombian author and journalist—as well as the 1982 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature—who demonstrated that “The best way a writer can serve a revolution is to write as well as he can” (“Nadine Gordimer - Nobel Lecture”). And to write well may mean to cross the borders of writing purely from one’s experience. Gordimer concludes her lecture: “The writer is of service to humankind only insofar as the writer uses the word even against his or her own loyalties [and] trusts the state of being, as it is revealed” (“Nadine Gordimer - Nobel Lecture”). By trusting the state of being, the writer is not confined to a certain meaning of a word at that moment in time—meanings change over time. By exploring the tensions, contradictions, and controversial opinions that exist, writers will contribute in a special way to a political agenda without dedicating themselves to the expectations of a political writer.

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In the first two chapters, we saw Gordimer’s reasons for separating herself from the protest writers, rejecting the ideology that writing *only* about their experiences will facilitate change. Through this rejection, Gordimer turned more to the aesthetic literary world, accomplishing the evocation of literary recognition in the reader. In Felski’s discussion of ‘Recognition’ as an experience encouraged by literature, Felski states: “As selfhood becomes self-reflexive, literature comes to assume a crucial role in exploring what it means to be a person” (Felski, 25). Self-

reflection, exemplified and prioritized in Gordimer's work, is essential in a piece of literature in order to influence the reader's perceptions. And as we have seen, through Gordimer's attention to language, character relationships and development, and committed way of writing, Gordimer draws in the reader to reevaluate his or her own positions. The Nobel Prize recognized Gordimer's talents, validating her opinions on how to responsibly write literature during a political time: never losing sight of highly aesthetic qualities. However, while the Nobel Prize praised her novels for helping to move society *forward*—recognizing her work as moving in “an ideal direction”—Gordimer's novels have a constant theme of reflecting *back*, of reevaluating relationships, language, and perceptions of the past. Furthermore, the endings of her novels cannot be described as ending in any sort of “ideal direction” as the Nobel Prize values their awarded literature. Instead, the characters are left amongst chaos and this sense of chaos is critical for understanding Gordimer's position in her novels—an indirect, almost absent role. And so, even when granted the Nobel Prize, Gordimer makes sure to claim that the literature that most successfully influences society is the literature that does not actively and purposefully do so.

Chapter Four: Concluding Remarks and Future Projects

The beginning of the thesis asked whether or not we are able to separate the politics of a novel from its status as an independent work of art before turning to Gordimer's work to analyze whether or not we can trust her statement that "writing is not a political activity." And as the previous chapters have revealed, Gordimer committed herself to the aesthetic and creative process in order to indirectly redefine the political perceptions of her readers under apartheid's repressive regime. She acknowledges that as a writer, politics inevitably infiltrated her work. However, as revealed by her use of the aesthetic, the politics were not found in her writing but rather in the *reactions* to her writing as encouraged by her aesthetic techniques.

And so, as the thesis concludes, we look forward in South Africa's history. In the past twenty years, South Africa has undergone massive political and social changes: incorporating democracy, desegregating school systems, and finding itself readmitted to the international communities, as signified in part by awarding one of its writers the Nobel Prize.¹⁵ Although the country has seen great progress, there are still many challenges facing the country, mainly the large income gap, with "over 50% of the total population, mostly black South Africans, living below the poverty line" (USAID 2005). And as reported by University of Cape Town professor Murray Leibbrandt and University of Michigan professors James Levinsohn and Justin McCrary, "While South Africans clearly have much more political freedom than they did under apartheid, the improvements in economic well-being are less apparent" ("Incomes in South Africa Since

¹⁵ According to the 2002 Annual Report by USAID, "seven years after the fall of apartheid and the installation of South Africa's first democratic government...major transformations of the judicial educational, health and governance systems have been launched to improve equity and increase local control and accountability." By 2004, South Africa had held "three consecutive national democratic elections." Furthermore, there has been a 22% increase in the literacy rate, suggesting an increase in the country's access to education across races (USAID 2004).

the fall of Apartheid”). With apartheid outlawed and government and prominent political figures publically working to unite the country’s races for the first time in centuries, we should next explore whether the writers in South Africa carry the same political and social burdens—the same pressures to write as the oppressed’s “mouthpieces?”

As the thesis has just explored, politics and literature have been inevitably intertwined during apartheid, regardless of how much a writer intends to separate them. The thesis came to a conclusion by revealing how Gordimer redefined the responsibilities that should be felt by a political writer. Her novels consisted of a reflection, rather than a projection, of ideals. Focusing on the aesthetic nature of her novels—the questions of language, the tensions of private, personal, and yet universal human experiences, and the concepts of re-evaluation and re-definition of the characters’ past behaviors—in order to indirectly address the realities of her environment, has led Gordimer to be labeled one of the most influential writers from South Africa. Even though Gordimer turned towards a more aesthetic practice when writing, politics inevitably blended with the aesthetic in the novels *Burger’s Daughter* and *July’s People*, supported by the Nobel Prize committee’s suggestion that her novels had progressed society. Having seen how the Nobel Prize committee valued Gordimer’s work, further research may be conducted to analyze how the awarding of the Nobel Prize in Literature to the second South African, thirteen years later, suggests a change in their acknowledgements of how literature, through its aesthetic, works to influence a country’s political environment.

We can begin to see the changes in the perceptions of writers by the awarding of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature to South African J.M. Coetzee. Coetzee was recognized as a writer “who in innumerable guises portrays the surprising involvement of the outsider” (“Nobel Prize in Literature 2003—Press Release”). The Press Release focused on Coetzee’s “interest” which “is

directed mainly at situations where the distinction between right and wrong, while crystal clear, can be seen to serve no end.” In other words, his novels do not necessarily advance society. Furthermore, in this press release, the Nobel Prize does not focus on any of the terms used to describe Gordimer’s work—leading society in “an ideal direction,” for example. Instead, they acknowledge that his “characters stand behind themselves, motionless, incapable of taking part in their own actions.” We see this sense of motionless particularly in his novel *Disgrace*, published in 1999. In *Disgrace*, a white university professor loses his job when he engages in a sexual relationship with a coloured student and moves in with his daughter, who is then raped by black townspeople in her village. This novel focuses on the reluctance of individuals to change society; the daughter accepts her rape as part of living in her town and the father runs away from his scandal rather than fixing his image, as he colleagues suggest. As both father and daughter work to find their places back in society, the Nobel Prize finds this novel dealing “with a question that is central to his [Coetzee’s] works: Is it possible to evade history?” (“Nobel Prize in Literature 2003—Press Release”). While Gordimer’s apartheid novels focus on reflection, reevaluation, and redefinition, Coetzee’s post-apartheid novel deals with accepting the situation one is in and failing to fix it. Coetzee deals with how society can just be stuck.

When Gordimer was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1991, President de Klerk had only stated that he planned to repeal the apartheid laws. Regardless of his legislative inaction, there was great hope that equality among all races would soon be attained. We can suggest that even the Nobel Prize board believed that South Africa would soon progress to a true democracy when they chose to award Gordimer for her efforts in “shaping” the anti-apartheid effort, bringing society forward. As would soon be revealed, however, real democracy and equality would take years to achieve. It took South Africa three more years to achieve free and democratic elections,

when blacks were able to vote for the first time in 1994. Even after achieving these elections, non-white South Africans continued to face discrimination and segregation in their everyday social lives, particularly in their economic vitality. And as we turn to the Nobel Prize's distinction of Coetzee's work, the Nobel Prize recognizes how his novels reflect the hardships that South Africa continues to face—that it may be impossible “to evade history”—rather than suggest that his work transcends the history of society. The sense of optimism and hope found in the Nobel Prize's expectations of Gordimer's novels are not found in the Nobel Prize Press Release for Coetzee, which instead draws on the hardships and inequality that continued to remain. Through this parallel between the Nobel Prize's appreciation of these works and the political environment during this recognition, we can see how the politics of a country influence the political value found in a piece of literature. The aesthetic value, however, remains independent.

Although the Nobel Prize awards these writers at different moments in South Africa's history and praises them for very different accomplishments, Gordimer and Coetzee's aesthetic techniques are always central to their awards and the first to be discussed in the Nobel Prize press releases. For example, Gordimer is awarded for her “intense immediacy,” while Coetzee is recognized for his novels' “well-crafted composition, pregnant dialogue and analytical brilliance.” Only after recognizing their aesthetic accomplishments do the press releases turn to their political accomplishments, influenced by the environment within which they were writing. And so, through these awards, we see the prioritizing of the aesthetic in order to achieve the political not only in Gordimer's writing, but also in the recognitions by the Nobel Prize in Literature.

While I do not intend to suggest that the Nobel Prize should be the gold standard for how we judge the aesthetic and its affectivity in novels, what I have revealed in this thesis is a convergence of opinions about tendentious forms of writing: that politics cannot be the first aim of the creative enterprise. Beginning with Lewis Nkosi, I have revealed that an expectation to maintain the aesthetic in black protest writing was an expectation from one of the protest literature's own writers. Although Nkosi faced criticism from protest writers for calling on this literary form, he did not waver on his observation that simply *telling* a story does not engage a reader (Steibel and Gunner xvi). We see Gordimer continue this prioritization of aesthetic writing in her own novels, in which the reader becomes engaged with the language, relationships, and developments of the characters rather than the political background. She found the significance in Barthes and Adorno's theories—particularly Adorno, who also prioritized the aesthetic after surviving his own country's oppressive regime—while writing during South Africa's most politically oppressive era, suggesting that the aesthetic can never be lost even if writing for a political purpose. And with the awarding of the Nobel Prize, we see that the Nobel Prize concurs with these forms of commitment and creativity—that there is more to literary creation than meeting directly political expectations.

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