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## Narrative Strategy in Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*

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The narrative strategy becomes specially significant in evaluating a novelist like Nadine Gordimer whose evolution as a writer of merit considerably depends on its skillful, competent use. The 'narrative technique/strategy' may be interpreted as the way or the manner in which a novelist gives a detailed account of a number of connected events, the experiences which may be true or fictitious by using skill.

Gordimer's novel, *The Conservationist* was a joint winner of the Booker prize in 1974. As a critic remark in the Observer (quoted on the back flap of the text), "The author of this gravel beautiful book has transcended her considerable talent and produced one of those rare works of imaginative literature that command the special respect reserved for artistic daring and fulfilled ambition. Gordimer has earned herself a place among the few novelists who really matter. *The Conservationist* reads as if it had to be written." The narrative strategy of the novel is complex, and involves an equivocal treatment of the prediction of political change, the nature of a benighted white consciousness and the idea of conservative. The central protagonist of the novel, Mehring's, the white 'colonizer', is not the narrator. A variety of different styles are used to suit varying needs in the novel. But a pre-eminent contrast may be that between present-tense narration of what are presented as Mehring's current actions and thoughts, and past-tense narration of past events, of the contemporary activities of others like Jacobus, the chief farmhand, and of enduring conditions and habitual activities, Gordimer's third- person narration is directed to the portrayal of back society here. The narrator privileges of the white personified in him, old, passionate and he is made to realize that Africa is not the prerogative of the white man alone.

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

The end of the novel is pathetic. It ends with the formal burial of the Black man. Mehring has disappeared from the farm, he is phoned up at his office about money for the coffin, and the black workers perform the ritual that has been denied to the dead no name; no member of his family is present, yet, 'he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them'.(252) Michael Thorpe(1983:190) indicates that "there is no obligation in custom to someone who is not a family member or a revered elder. The murdered man has dubious associations with the shanty town and may well be a casualty of gang warfare". We find Mehring alone at the end of the novel. There is no one to answer his telephone calls; but he has illusions about the calls. He imagines that the caller is Antonia, his former mistress, while the real caller is Terry with whom he longs for union. This is the alienation of the worst order. All his relations-

wife, son and mistress-have left him and he has to sell the land and there is no perpetuation of his line. The labourers who work on the farm will continue, but the ownership will change. The man who worked for the future and for the farm will never return there.

Irony is worked rather subtly at various levels in the novel. The association in Mehring's mind of landscape and objects of sexual desire reveals the irony of his position as 'Conservationist', and there are other instances which confirm this ironic situation. For example: Mehring's neighbor Old De Beer, a landowner, a man whose size bespeaks prosperity: "Old De Beer is a handsome man, ...Oh to wear your manhood, fatherhood like that, eh, stud and authority" (47). This is Mehring's view which is ironized by a co-existing authorial accent. His relationship with the farm is fundamentally ironic. It is he, as a conservation-minded master, who is obliged to clean up after his 'servants'. Ancestorship is also ironic in the novel, because his son, Terry is possibly homosexual. Mehring loves the land, plants a Spanish chestnuts on the estate for his son's benefit, but Terry lets him down. The black body is a kind of incarnation of irony in the novel. The more Mehring attempts to repress its significance within his own mind, the more decisively it returns to haunt him.

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

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

Everything he says is in this sense a pun, totally laced with irony. Even language participates in the ironic structure of the novel, in particular the central pun, 'nothing'. When the body is first discovered, Jacobus says there is 'nothing for this man' (16). On a realistic level this is correct; there is nothing for the black man and all he represents. But when in a kind of humble pride of possession Mehring sits in his fields and declares that he 'wants for nothing' (159), his statement is ironic. Mehring says he wants the farm for relaxation, but look at what he 'gives away': "Times to let go, as the saying has it. It's agreed that's what a placed like this is for' (156). In short 'nothing' is a central pun which refer both to Mehring's inner condition and to his coming inheritance. Even Mehring's language means the opposite of what he intends. Thinking 'no' when the woman asks him for a lift(252), he nevertheless lets her into his car: repeatedly saying 'No, no' (248-51) to his fate, he is irresistibly drawn towards it and succumbs.

Gordimer uses very illuminating metaphors in the novel. For example, the corpse of the obscure black is used as a metaphor. The corpse occupies a central position in Mehring's reflections. It haunts him, "A dead man, but he doesn't speak the same language....He feels the stirring of the shameful curiosity, like imagining what goes on behind a bathroom door, About what happens under s covering of earth..."(225). He is interrupted in his various moods-disgust, anger and joy. There is the macabre scene: "A pair of shoes appeared. They held still the shape of feet, like the ones put out to dry up at the compound" (245). The corpse surfaces as it is not carefully buried.

As pointed out by Laurence Perrine (1959:307), the novelist uses the point of view as a device for solving his difficulties. It is the point of view from which the story is told. In *The Conservationist*, Gordimer presents Mehring's capitalist point of view. His conviction that only a productive farm can be beautiful is a mercenary view, but also one of efficient husbandry. (64)Thus, Mehring displays concern for the eco-system of his farm after fire damage. He articulates a concern for the inter-independence of flora and fauna. He also lays plans for the future in planting oaks (140) and European chestnuts (210). It means that the planting of no-

indigenous varieties is both conservation and colonization. There is a sense in which his desire for the land is industrialist associated with the development. As Christopher Hope (1975:54) states: "In his international ventures, selling pig-iron to the Japanese, Mehring represents an additional penetration in this period: of a unified national capital into the international market."

Another grammatical structural device used by Gordimer in the novel is 'tense'. The first section of the novel is closely aligned to Mehring, and reports, in present tense, largely from his spatio-temporal perspective: "Swaying over the ruts to the gate of the third pasture, Sunday morning the owner of the farm suddenly sees: a clutch of pale freckled eggs...."(9) The section reports what Mehring experiences, moving from a position of considerable distance to a character-internal account of matters. In referring to his as The Farmer, the narrator uses perfective and progressive and progressive aspects, For example, "He has left the road and struck out across the veld"(10), "He is crossing a Lucerne field" (21), etc. The later style is evident, for example, when Mehring reflects on the fact that the black farmhands have evidently inspected the body of the man found murdered in one of the fields:

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

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

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