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Stream of Consciousness Technique in Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*

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The novelist employs some methods of representation, but he/she does so in the form of a narrative. The novelist describes life or experience of life which is content of the novel. Therefore, the content of life which is presented in the novel is important.

Nadine Gordimer is one of the foremost fiction writers in South Africa and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1991. Nadine Gordimer was recognized as a potentially major artist, a talented, serious and careful writer who treated important contemporary issues. She has an unusual interest in the symbolic, the psychological and also the art of fiction. Her novel *The Conservationist* (1974) is in a sort of the stream of consciousness technique describing the life of Mehring the Afrikaner, whose farm is as barren as his life.

As pointed out by Macauley and Lanning (1964:163), it is usually through dialogue that the character is revealed. In the novel, *The Conservationist*, Mehring's stream of consciousness is taken up in dialogue. Yet, this dialogue is almost entirely conducted inside his own mind in a continuous, obsessive debate with absent characters. As Stephen Clingman (1986:163) points out: "In some respects *The Conservationist*, might well be called *The Conservationist*, for Mehring is, in a sense, a compulsive conservationist". This does not apply only to Jacobus. Mehring addresses his absent mistress, after she has fled the country: "If you come back to the same spot this afternoon, if it were possible ever to find it again, on this farm, you might see the beetle there still alive, may be still bound with filaments of shroud the spider will wind it in; sometimes it will be there for days until the spider drags it down into the hole – everything takes its own time out here, whatever do. You are bored? I'm not." (180). Similarly, he addresses his son, first absent in Namibia, then later in New York with his wife, whom he also 'speaks to' in this way. For example:

"You don't call me anything But that doesn't change who you are. – Oh jolly good idea, how're things? Has it been a cold Christmas there? Having a good time? I've been very quiet, taking it really easy – slept the New York in, believe it or not, in bed at ten o'clock more or less-

And then? A silence while distance is something audible if not palpable : that faint supersonic ringing in the ears, of long distance lines, those wavering under-sea voices that are always there, forlorn sirens of other conversations thinly tangled across millions of miles, Can you hear me? Think of something to say next.” (220).It means all these are addressed, without name, simply as ‘you’.

Technique is subservient to an ulterior cause. Within this limitation, of course, Gordimer makes experimentation with technique. It is the modernist-style stream of consciousness that dominates the narrative of *The Conservationist* and through it Mehring’s life, as barren as his farm, and his psyche are presented. Gordimer employs the interior monologue, which, in its limited point of view, is most appropriate to the experience of Africa as inside the white mind. We move forward and backward in the consciousness of the character. Through flashbacks and stream of consciousness, Mehring thinks back on the affair with Antonia, on problems posed by his son, Terry, and on sexual conquests both old and new – all interwoven with his experiences at the farm. The method of stream of consciousness is chosen, as Dominic Head (1994:106) points out, ‘to present a psyche in confusion’. Mehring’s final internal monologue represents an instant recapitulation of the issues that have occurred around his character through the novel :

“He’s going to run, run and leave them to rape her to rob her. She’ll be all right. They survive everything. Coloured or poor-white, whichever she is, their brothers or fathers take their virginity good and early. They can have it, the whole four hundred acres. ...That’s a white tart and there was no intent, anyway, report these gangsters or police thugs terrorizing people on mine property, he’s on a Board with the chairman of the Group this ground still belongs to No, no, no. RUN – Come. Come and look, they’re all saying. What is it? Who is it? It’s Mehring. It’s Mehring, down there.” (264)

Mehring is obviously the focalizer in this passage which presents ‘a psyche in confusion’. It associates Mehring’s sexual and geographical habits of exploitation, and his underlying insecurity, a fear of being discovered, of being forced out of his cocoon of self-absorption. His worry at being discovered committing a sexual misdemeanour produces the immediate impulse to give up the farm – ‘the whole four hundred acres’ – as recompense. The above passage ends, still apparently with Mehring’s monologue, imagining or hearing the voices of friends looking down upon his beaten body, his final monologue ends with an exteriorized view as the cocoon is

destroyed. His stream of consciousness is ruptured by internal as external forces, and this suggests that the mentality he represents contains the seeds of its own destruction. Peter Kerr-Jarrett, a critic, remarks in the Sunday Telegraph (quoted on the back flap of the text), “The sounds, smells and foliage, the weaving lights of the veld, are evoked in the passages of cool delicate prose that prove their author one of the ablest descriptive writers alive”.

The novel *The Conservationist* is made up of Mehring’s reminiscences, nightmares and imaginary conversations. Gordimer makes creative use of imagery. The hero works in images. The images “Pale freckled eggs” of the guinea fowls, with which the novel opens, recur and keep the action of the novel based on the farm together. There is the macabre image – the corpse of an unknown black murdered on Mehring’s farm and rudely buried by the heartless Boer police. The body’s inadequate burial has been haunting him for about ten years, through he has endeavoured hard to forget it. The murdered man is the image of the black’s claim to their land. Christopher Heywood (1983:32) states: “The *Conservationist* explores its theme of sterility and renewal through the imagery of landscape and physiology...” Mehring is allowed to live in a world of dream and also reflection. The narrative which takes us through his dreams is fascinating. Mehring is unable to communicate with both the living and the dead. His fantasy takes all sorts of shapes – he is restless.

In short, *The Conservationist* has all the techniques of a modern novel; symbols and metaphor food it, the darkened atmosphere and an ambivalence points to the future. The war between the forces of light and the forces darkness has already begun and that for the time, Mehring is holding the fort alone. As a critic remarks in the *New Statesman* (quoted on the back flap of the text), “A triumph of style . . . this is a novel of enormous power”.

In the novel, *The Conservationist*, Gordimer makes use of the so-called stream of consciousness technique in the form of interior monologue. In the novel, she employs the term used by V. de Sola Pinto (1972:13) ‘the introvert tendency’: The innovative use of narrative perspective is not always so suspicious; however, it can be used to explore the restricted inwardness of the white psyche.

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