

# *The Conservationist* (1974):

How the Novel Portrays South African  
Apartheid and its Ultimate Consequences

PS/Ü Postcolonial Nobel Prize Laureates

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# Thesis

Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* illustrates the effect Apartheid in South Africa has on the people, both black and white. Furthermore the novel prophesizes the end of the system and the land's return to the black majority.

# Nadine Gordimer

Born: 20 November 1923 in Springs, South Africa

Died: 13 July 2014 in Johannesburg, South Africa

Anti-Apartheid activist

Censored multiple times by South African Government

Receives Nobel Prize in 1991

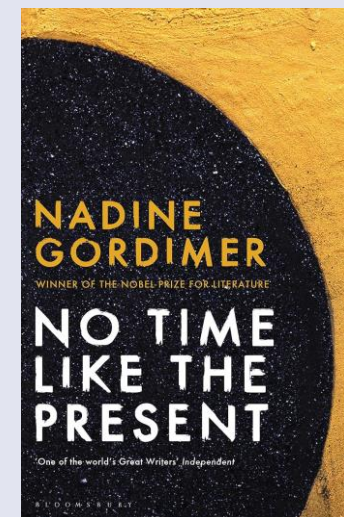
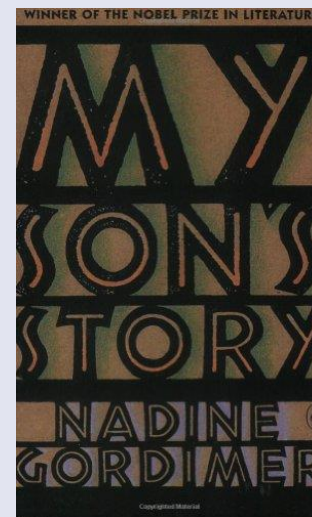
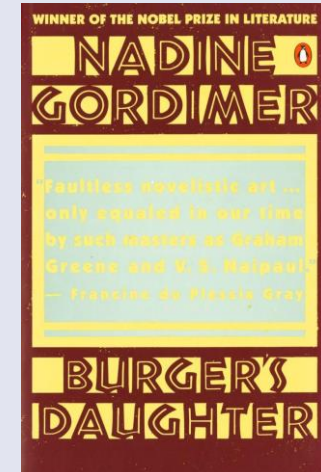
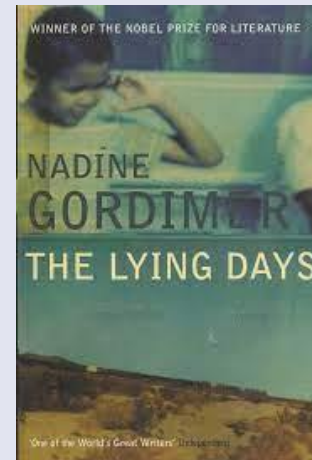
Reason for Prize: "who through her magnificent epic writing has - in the words of Alfred Nobel - been of very great benefit to humanity"

(<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1991/summary/>)



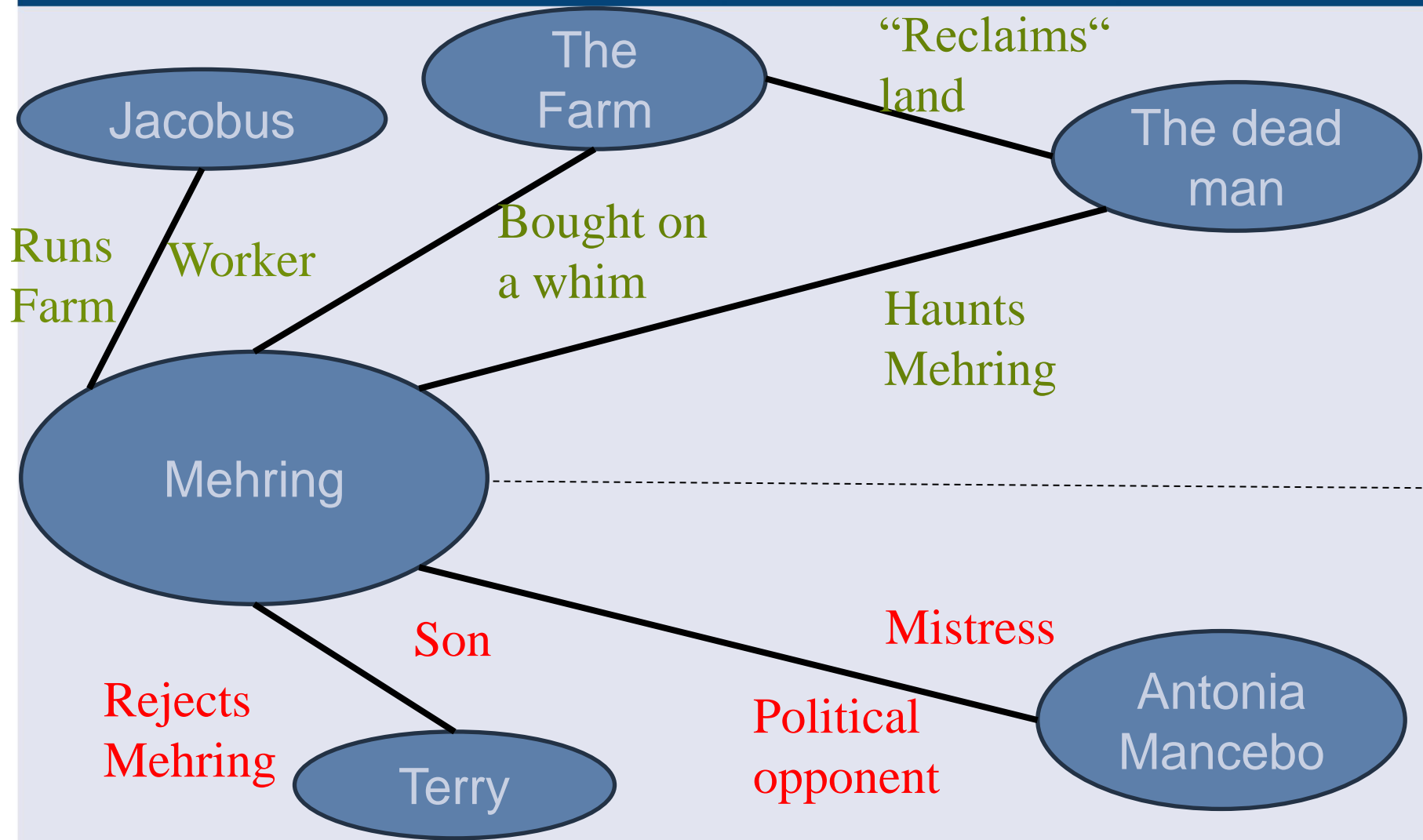
# Main Works

- 1953 *The Lying Days*
- 1970 *A Guest of Honor*
- 1974 *The Conservationist*
- 1979 *Burger's Daughter*
- 1981 *July's People*
- 1987 *A Sport of Nature*
- 1990 *My Son's Story*
- 1994 *None to Accompany Me*
- 2005 *Get a Life*
- 2012 *No Time Like the Present*



## *The Conservationist* (1974)

- The novel explores Apartheid in South Africa through the lens of Mehring, a white rich South African man and his relationship to his farm
- The farm Mehring acquires, initially purely for leisure, becomes an increasingly important part of his life, and a symbol for South Africa more broadly
- The corpse of a black man, discovered and later discarded on the land, continuously haunts Mehring
- The dead man is an “invader” on Mehring lands but is much more connected to the country, than Mehring is
- Later a flood brings the body back to the surface, where it receives a proper burial and symbolically returns the land to its native population



## Apartheid South Africa

“I don’t ask anyone there. I won’t say this one or that one. Who or who. But all the same - He rapped four fingers at the bony plate of his breast, behind which this knowledge, for all of them, was thrust away. This house smells of cat. For weeks now. Every time he comes, he is greeted by it. It’s because the place is shut up all week. She never ever came to the house. Although he has spoken to the servants nothing seems to be done. There are too many cats around and God knows how they keep alive, anyway.” (Gordimer p. 68)



## Apartheid South Africa



- Apartheid is depicted from a more intimate perspective
- Juxtaposition between live of black workers and white elite
- Different attitude towards the land

Black Workers	White Elite
Live in slums or huts (p. 32)	Luxurious apartments and cars (p. 190)
Farm as place of work (p. 181)	Farm as leisure (p. 21)
Drifters looking for work (p. 67)	Travel around the world (p. 39)
Knowledge of farm work (p. 207)	Knowledge of business (p. 178)

# The Effect of Apartheid on White South Africans

“He is going to leave her to them. He’s going, in a matter of seconds – mustn’t give himself away by so much as glancing towards the car- he’s going to make a dash for it, a leap, sell the place to the first offer., jump in, the key’s there in the ignition, and drive off reversing wildly... he’s going to run, run and leave them to rape her or rob her. She’ll be all right. They survive everything... they can have it, the whole four hundred acres.” (Gordimer p. 264)

# The Effect of Apartheid on White South Africans

- White people claim ownership of the land
- Feeling of superiority over black people
- Preservation of status quo by white minority
- But: Black people are majority and work on the land
- White people become paranoid and start to fear black minority
- Ultimately abandoning of land and power out of fear

## Reclaiming the Land

“Without consulting Jacobus, Witbooi had privately provided a pile of medium-sized stones to surround the mound as he would mark out a flower-bed in a white man’s garden. The one whom the farm received had no name. He had no family but their women wept a little for him. There was no child of his present but their children were there to live after him. They had put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them.” (Gordimer p. 267)

## Reclaiming the Land

- Dead man symbolic for black South Africans connection to the land
- Funeral as an act of reclamation of the land
- Passing the land to the next generation
- Mehring loses control of the farm
- Ultimately becomes irrelevant
- Symbol for the end of white power in South Africa

## Conclusion

Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* illustrates the effect Apartheid has on the people of South Africa. It shows the economic and cultural suppression it inflicts on people of color, as well as the resulting paranoia of the white elite.

The novel also depicts the inevitable end of the system and the return of the country to its original inhabitants.

It does this by taking an intimate point of view, using a small farm as a symbol for the entire country and few characters to explain the realities of large groups of people.

# Bibliography

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