

Her argument is convincing. Deconstruction hardly seems the politically empty theory some make it out to be. In fact, in the hands of a practitioner as careful, subtle, and sensitive as Eckstein, deconstruction is pretty hard to resist.

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Rowland Smith, ed. *Critical Essays on Nadine Gordimer*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990. pp. 226. \$38.00.

Rowland Smith has gathered together in this volume sixteen essays that cover Gordimer's fiction from *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* to *A Sport of Nature*. His intention is to "present a historical survey of reviews or comment" (12) and in this he is successful: the essays range in date from 1953 to 1988. His second objective is to provide "coverage" of Gordimer's major work (18). The analysis in this coverage, however, varies in quality.

The emphasis in the collection is on Gordimer's novels.¹ While Smith decries the lack of space that forced him to leave out some "notable" (18) essays, he includes three essays that are chapters of other readily available books.² Much of his introduction is taken up with mapping the ill-informed ways that Gordimer has been viewed in South Africa, particularly in the popular press, by conservative and liberationist critics alike. In addition to providing a historical perspective, Smith's introductory overview serves to remind readers of the political caldron in which Gordimer lives and works, and why she is so readily and easily labelled a "political" writer.

Smith concludes his introduction with this observation: "The collection of essays that follows includes the best that has been written about her work since 1953, and . . . illustrates the breadth of interest in one of the major novelists . . . writing today" (19). This statement betrays the major weakness of the collection. While some of the "best" is included here, there is also a fair bit that is not particularly insightful or illuminating.

The collection does show the variety of ways Gordimer and her fiction are read. There is the annoying, condescending approach, particularly of the early criticism, that says she is a good writer but is cold and distant. (It is not always clear if such criticism refers to her style or her character or both.) For example, in an early comment on Gordimer and her writing, Anthony Delius observes:

There is here and there a slightly spurious sophistication, a tendency to functional monotony and lack of grace, a hint of barren nervousness, and a faint female smugness. But they are only the irritating by-products of her great virtues as a writer. . . . (24)

This essay was no doubt included to mark the beginning of the serious consideration of Gordimer as a writer and to provide "coverage" of *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*. Yet we do not learn much about the collection of short stories. An unfortunate effect of including the essay is that it "legitimizes" this kind of patriarchal commentary. The answer that it is "historical" does not, in my mind, justify the content.

Some of the essays indulge in the kind of criticism that comments on the author and slides conclusions on to her novels so that it seems that the novels and the author are the same text. Lionel Abrahams writes in "Nadine Gordimer: The Transparent Ego" that

Miss Gordimer . . . is either warmed or chilled, sweetened or soured, opened or closed, by whatever scene she confronts, before her imagination can begin to come to grips with it. And since the subjects that elicit the best in her seem to be those she encounters some distance out of the way of her daily life, she has something like a duty to do a kind of adventuring, a hunting of "experience." (29)

Again, one is left wondering about the value of repeating commentary that judges the person by way of the writing.

Related to this approach is the ideological biography whereby one can trace Gordimer's personal ideology through reading her novels. The evolving nature of Gordimer's white "liberalism" is the favoured story in this regard. Robert Green concludes his essay on the strengths and weaknesses of *A World of Strangers* with this comment:

The interest, then, of *A World of Strangers* is that it enables us to trace the development of a critique of liberalism in Miss Gordimer's work and to situate the later novels within the context of earlier, less formed views. Though it has been cruelly overtaken by later events the early novel is valuable for its documentation of the innocence, vulnerability and impracticality of the liberalism of the fifties. (85)

One may read the novels also as ideological handbooks. In this light, her novels are about how white liberals should have acted or have failed to act in the political climate of South Africa. Richard Peck's "What's a Poor White to Do? White South African Options in *A Sport of Nature*" is an explicit example of this approach: "Nadine Gordimer's most recent novel, *A Sport of Nature* (1987), examines and rejects a variety of white South African roles — conservative, hedonist, and liberal — and offers a vision of a more revolutionary alternative" (153). While reading Gordimer as a political commentator may seem to be the most obvious and "correct" way of approaching her work, such criticism is easily dated, especially now, given the rapid change of events in South Africa since the release of Nelson Mandela.

The best of this collection are those essays that explore questions such as the political nature of Gordimer's work with a greater critical

rigour and attention to the text. Elaine Fido argues in "A Guest of Honour: A Feminine View of Masculinity" that in spite of what other critics have said, the political is not "the most important aspect of the novel" (97). She convincingly demonstrates how through the character of Bray the "relationship of masculinity to power and therefore to politics" operates (99). Likewise, Dorothy Driver supplies a cogent reading of how politics may be understood given a feminist critique of Gordimer's texts. Driver covers a number of novels to show how Gordimer "throws into clearer focus the complex links between race and sex, and women's part in the complexity . . ." (188). Driver goes on to show how racism arises as a "consequence of sexism" (193).

Another critical approach is exhibited by Michael Thorpe in "The Motif of the Ancestor in *The Conservationist*." Thorpe nicely demonstrates the importance of the intertextuality of Gordimer's text with that of the Reverend Henry Callaway's *The Religious System of the Amazulu*, and *Unkulunkulu*. Thorpe rightly argues that the "reader finds that her [Gordimer's] use of Callaway yields its full meaning only if one goes to the source" (117). This essay is particularly helpful in that Callaway's texts are not readily known or available outside of South Africa.

While this collection of essays presents the reader with a variety of ways by which Gordimer and her texts may be read, it also suggests that there is much more yet to be done, that Gordimer's work generously repays further readings. Perhaps the best example of this is Judie Newman's "Prospero's Complex: Race and Sex in Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*." The questions of race and sex in Gordimer are, of course, not new concerns, but Newman comes at these questions through an examination of Gordimer's narrative technique, the way Gordimer structures the language. Other than comments about her "style," little has been done to show how Gordimer carefully structures her texts in complex narrative ways. Newman states: "It is my contention that the complex art of *Burger's Daughter* refuses to maintain the text at the level of private fantasy or dream, and also avoids the danger of the depersonalised image" (129). In fact, the structuring of the text does not allow passivity on the part of the reader. She argues:

The alternation between first and third person narrative creates a tension between external image and internal voice, between "She" and "I." As "You," the reader continually mediates the two, correcting the errors of the eye, emerging from the spell of the internal voice. The reader is therefore offered a choice. He may place the voice addressing him as initiating him into a secret intimacy. Or he may refuse to identify with a surrogate "You" and thus register the possibility of a world in which communication is not limited to depersonalized stereotypes. (128)

Newman's essay, especially in the context of this collection, raises the question of how the structuring of the narrative vis-à-vis the reader functions in other Gordimer texts. Thus, what is gathered together in Rowland Smith's collection of essays is a variety of commentaries that seem at times to miss completely the mark and at others to challenge and illuminate.

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NOTES

- ¹ One short essay by Anthony Delius touches on Gordimer's first collection of stories ("Danger from the Digit: *The Soft Voice of the Serpent*"). Another essay, "Cutting the Jewel: Facets of Art in Nadine Gordimer's Short Stories," by Kevin Magarey, deals with several of her collections of stories; however, after reading sophomoric commentary on summaries of various stories and learning that there is a "poetic structure" (47) to some of the stories, the reader gains little insight.
- ² The three essays are: Abdul R. JanMohamed's "The Degeneration of the Great South African Lie: *Occasion for Loving*" (90-96) from *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (1983); John Cooke's "Landscapes Inhabited in Imagination: *A Guest of Honour*" (104-16) from *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives/Public Landscapes* (1985); and Stephen Clingman's "Deep History" (205-22), a somewhat tortured structuralist reading of Gordimer that is the introductory chapter to *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (1986); Clingman's essay should really be read in context with the rest of his text. These selections are no doubt added to help meet the objective of providing "coverage."

C. L. Innes. *Chinua Achebe*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990. pp. 199. \$34.50.

C. L. Innes begins her study of Achebe with a rather uncharitable reference to the earlier books on him which she characterizes as merely "introductions . . . concerned chiefly with describing the novels in terms of their central themes, conflicts and characters" (1). Her own book, she claims, will demonstrate that Achebe has created "a new English *literature*" through his use of the novel form and the alterations he has made to it "to suit its new African surroundings." In doing so, she would not merely pay due attention to Achebe's concern with language and historical change but would also place particular emphasis on Achebe's "Africanization of the novel, trying to discern what elements he has used and what innovations he has made in his development as a novelist" (2).

Her principal strategy in trying to substantiate her claim is to stress the central importance of Joyce Cary's work as the chief stimulus to Achebe's fiction — right from his decision to try his hand at writing